

BBC

DOCTOR WHO

SALVATION



STEVE LYONS



The gods have returned, and they're here to save our world.

New York, 1965. A time of conflict between ideologies, races, generations and genders, when crime runs rife and an unpopular war drags on in a distant land. In the midst of this turmoil, people cry out to their gods.

And now, it seems, the gods have answered their call. Walking the slums and tenements of downtown Manhattan, demonstrating extraordinary powers, five strangers are gathering a growing crowd of worshippers.

Steven wants to believe in miracles, but the Doctor is more sceptical. What are the strangers' real motives, and why does history make no mention of these events? As New York begins to tear itself apart, the Doctor's principles are tested to their limits. Which side should he choose to help? And what part will a London schoolgirl named Dorothea Chaplet play in the ensuing chaos?

What price is humankind willing to pay for salvation?

Featuring the First Doctor and Steven, and introducing Dodo, this adventure takes place between THE MASSACRE and THE ARK.

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SALVATION

STEVE LYONS

BBC
BOOKS

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Chapter One

CITY OF LIGHTS

Manhattan. A rash of UFO sightings broke out, after onlookers saw green lights in the sky above Midtown last night. A police spokeswoman said: 'It seems that one or two people experienced an unusual optical effect. There is no cause for concern.'

New York Ranger, Saturday March 20, 1965 (p17)

An unpleasant drizzle ground a thin layer of snow into the dirt of the sidewalks. The sun was a cold ball draped in mist, unwilling to combat the entrenched frigidity in the air. A decade and a half before New York was famously labelled the 'city that doesn't sleep', its lower east side stretched and yawned and thought about spending a few more minutes under the sheets before it braved an unwelcoming Sunday.

The Bowery was particularly slow to rise from the torpor of the dawn. Henry Wilkes preferred it that way. Uptown, the glassy eyes of towering buildings would look down on his limping gait and filthy salvaged raincoat, and judge him without truly seeing him. He would feel them, burning into his back, though he stared resolutely at the ground and struggled to ignore them. He had lurked behind those eyes himself once, in a long-gone life. The city accountant with the apartment he could barely afford, the wife he could not, and the deep, insistent loneliness in his gut to which only a slug of whiskey behind his desk in the morning could bring relief.

The Bowery's eyes were concealed behind wooden shutters. And, though many had been torn open, the eyes themselves were dead, burnt out. Nobody watched him here.

The cold bit into Henry's skin, but it had done its worst already. His bones were chilled to the marrow, their brittle throb a constant companion. His nerves were dead, his lungs hot and coarse with illness. His thoughts were a barely cognisant haze. He had learned not to think; at least, not beyond his next bottle. He coughed up bile and trudged

through brown slush, not knowing where he went, just marking time until people next filled the streets, perhaps taking pity on a down-on-his-luck bum and tossing a few coins his way. When he had scraped enough together, he would drink himself into a pleasant oblivion; not have to suffer life until the flophouse opened its doors again and he could sleep.

Rare were the days on which Henry's simple routine was disturbed. A night in the cells here, a knife to the throat there, steel toecaps in his ribs if sniggering, taunting thugs took offence to him. It didn't make much difference any more.

So, when somebody appeared in front of Henry, his first impulse was to shuffle on by. When another man blocked his path, and he turned to find himself surrounded, he simply came to a halt, looked glumly at his own battered shoes and waited for the strangers to do as they wished. If he felt fear at all, then the emotion was buried in a part of himself he had forgotten how to reach. Henry cared about his own fate no more than did anybody else.

But, today, a remarkable thing happened.

The first stranger spoke to him. *To* him, not at him, and expected an answer, which Henry was too nonplussed to give. He tried to recall the last occasion on which his vocal cords had been used for anything more than obedient grunts or yelps of pain. The stranger put his question again and, this time, Henry concentrated on deciphering the words, knowing that they would have meant more to him once.

'What do you need?'

For the first time in his memory – and, he was sure, for days, at least, beyond it – Henry Wilkes looked up. He looked up, and saw a golden-haired, broad-shouldered man, his size impressive next to Henry's stooped posture, his eyes a deep azure. He wore a spotless white suit, and seemed to radiate power in a way that Henry could not understand. He didn't know why he acted as he did next, it just seemed the right thing to do. He sank to his knees, although his joints protested at the movement, and he turned his face away from the stranger's perfection. His skin tingled, not unpleasantly, as the man reached down and laid a hand on Henry's tangled, unwashed hair.

'You need not speak, if you find it painful. Your needs are clear enough in your mind. You called to us with your pain.'

Henry had done no such thing – had he? It was so hard to remember sometimes, and this man would not lie to him, surely.

Henry did not hear what the man said next. His mind exploded with pictures, and suddenly he was back in the office in his grey suit and neatly combed hair, and Gwen was still at home and loving him... he was arguing with Gwen, hardly able to stand, less able to form coherent words, lashing out in frustration... he was at his desk, slipping in and out of a doze, the bottle lying open, a deep stain spreading across the woodwork... arriving at the apartment, to find his clothes in the hallway, a letter from his landlord.

Henry cried as he lost his wife, his job, his home, his self respect, all over again, in images more stark and detailed than he had thought was possible for him to see any more.

When his vision cleared, he was being lifted by strong hands beneath his arms. Insistent voices asked if he was all right; to his own surprise, he nodded. They left him to stand on his own, the young couple, but didn't recoil, didn't sneer, didn't look away and hurry across the street. Henry felt strange, but wasn't sure why.

'I saw someone run into the alleyway.'

'A filthy bum, I'll bet.'

'Did he get your wallet?'

'Streets aren't safe any more, 'specially not round here.'

'Will you be all right?'

He fended off their concerns with grunts and nods, until they left him alone. Of the golden-haired stranger and his friends, there was no sign. But Henry was beginning to realise what they had done to him.

He was wearing a familiar grey suit, with shiny black shoes. The feel of collar and tie at his newly clean-shaven throat was an unwelcome restriction, but he was breathing freely. His lungs no longer burnt, the rattling in his chest had disappeared, and a cold, refreshing wind had blown through his mind and blasted the dust away. Most bizarrely of all, the lonely hole in Henry's stomach had been filled, and was more contented now than ever it had been with booze licking at its edges.

He shambled towards a nearby pawnbroker's window, breaking into a jog when he felt that his leg had been healed. Trapped in the glass was a ghost of Henry Wilkes; of the man, rather, that Henry had once been. The accountant. The

upstanding citizen. A ghost of the past, but miraculously restored, Henry now knew, to the present.

Faced with that ghost, he could do nothing but stare and shake his head and laugh, a little at first with incredulity, then more, until the laughter took over and drove the misery and hardship of the past eight years, the questions and doubts about his transformation, away.

Henry Wilkes had been saved.

Monday night became Tuesday morning. Birds woke, to greet the day with song. Dorothea Chaplet listened to them, identifying each from its distinctive sound. Then it was spoilt. An engine coughed somewhere, the start of London's daily automotive chorus. New light filtered through curtains into Dorothea's room.

She didn't know why she had felt so restless of late. She thought she had accepted the situation; buried the tragedy of almost three years ago deep in her mind. Perhaps it was the approaching anniversary that caused her to mourn the death of her mother, and the consequent loss of her father, again. Perhaps the reminder of time elapsed had lessened a guilt within her, allowing her to feel a self-pity which, in the past, she had denied herself as being selfish.

Perhaps life had simply worn her down.

As a child, Dorothea remembered tracing a map of the world from an old atlas; pinning it proudly to her bedroom wall. She had drawn on the first star-shaped marker with a red felt-tipped pen. Florida, to where Mum and Dad had taken her for the most thrilling week of her life. It was hardly the other side of the world, and yet the culture, the people, the atmosphere had all been so different. The Everglades had teemed with life, of more varieties than Dorothea had ever seen. She had realised then that the world was a huge and diverse place. She had looked forward to seeing the rest of it.

In the aftermath of the tragedy, once the rest of her things had been packed, she had sat and looked at the map and its single red star for at least twenty minutes. Then she had carefully taken it down and looked at it for a while longer, before folding it neatly and dropping it into the waste bin, a symbol of dreams destroyed.

She was trapped in the big city now, prisoner of a great-aunt who cared little about her, but who had taken on the

burden of guardianship because nobody else cared at all. Memories of past hopes and ambitions only served to reinforce the cruelty of the present, and to coax tears from young Dorothea's eyes. She squirmed and turned and tried to find a comfortable position in which to settle, hoping for sleep to bring an end to the misery. But sleep would not come.

Dorothea ignored the sound at first. It was nothing important, just another intrusion from the city, part of the conspiracy to deny her peace. A whistling sound; no, whooshing, like a fierce gust of wind – but overhead, not around her. An aeroplane? Far too soft. Dorothea fixated upon the sound, though she had told herself not to.

The insides of her eyelids turned green.

Dorothea tumbled out of bed and leapt for the window. She tore back the curtains, and felt a thrill of excitement as she saw that the sky had taken on a bright emerald hue. For a second, she thought of exotic lands, and harboured the illogical hope that, since she could not travel to them, they had come to her at last.

Then the green light faded, and London returned to its normal, humdrum self.

Dorothea remained at her bedroom window for over an hour after that. She watched as morning settled in and people emerged onto the streets, falling into familiar, monotonous patterns. She saw nothing more to engage her interest. And, as eight o'clock arrived and she heard her great-aunt stirring in the next room, depression settled slowly back on to her shoulders.

Her life hadn't changed.

There was something wrong.

For a short time, the being had been content to drift upon an ethereal current of thoughts, riding flows and eddies in whichever directions they took. But now, a notion had occurred to it. A notion of self, an idea that it should have thoughts of its own; was not complete without them. It felt disturbed. It inspected the thoughts and picked up patterns, learned things about the human race. It discerned that it was not human itself. It did not know what it was.

The thoughts began to overwhelm it. Fear, suspicion, longing, boredom, hatred, spite; it could not imagine how humans had become so polluted and chaotic. That

judgement, it noted with satisfaction, was a personal one. At least, it thought so.

From somewhere came the realisation that, as an outsider, it could not be found here, exposed. It sprouted limbs, which seemed a natural thing to do. It dragged itself to its – what were they called? – feet, lurching at first but becoming more confident. The originators of the thoughts considered this a simple task.

The being homed in on an image of shelter, of comfort, of security. A place to hide, to collect itself, to work out what it was. Somewhere along the way, the concept of eyes occurred to it, so it grew some. The discovery that simple rays of light could be interpreted in such a magnificent way made sense of so many of the thoughts.

It was drawn to a structure of many hard, red components. Bizarrely, this building's integrity was compromised by areas in which its makers had used a thin, transparent, fragile material instead. The being entered the structure through one of these windows, feeling its sharp fragments cascading down newly formed arms.

The alluring thoughts came from immediately above it now – as the human race understood spatial relationships – but they had changed. Comfort was replaced by uncertainty; security had become fear. By now, the being had begun to see the thoughts as a number of discrete parcels, each associated with one entity. In a bid to understand what had so altered the emanations from this particular person, it focused upon its mind, to the exclusion of all others.

It became Neville Albert Miller. Eighty-two years old. Ex-RAF man. Took a shrapnel wound in the Great War. Widowed in 1958. Arthritis settling in. Lost most of his friends to age. Alone now. Read too much in the papers. Society breaking down, youths taking over. No respect. Crime on the increase. Sound of smashing glass. Violation. Someone in the house, his home. Damned if they'll take anything more from him. Makeshift club beneath the bed. Tiptoeing down the stairs in pyjamas in the bitter cold. Sweat between wood and skin on his palms.

The being knew all this. It allowed its form to shift and change, into a self-image presented to it by the thoughts. It basked in a new feeling of completeness, of self-awareness. Its confusion had ended. It – he – was Neville Albert Miller.

He turned his senses – this wonderful, wonderful sight – outward. He saw his template, pale and frozen, jaw agape, club in hand, in the doorway of his own living room. He reached out to the man, and felt his lips curl upwards. He accessed the thoughts – his thoughts – to find out what had caused this, and was pleased. He was smiling, overcome by a sense of belonging. His vocal cords needed fine adjustments but, once these were made, he would greet Neville Albert Miller and tell him that they were the same.

He was halted by a concentrated burst of terror and loathing, so powerful it hurt. Neville Albert Miller – the original – screamed, sprang towards his doppelganger, and brought the club down heavily upon the part of the being that he had come to think of as his head. This hurt too, though it took him a second to recognise the sensation of physical pain for what it was. In that second, his attacker struck again and again, drawing blood, buckling the being's legs and obscuring his newly lucid thought processes. As he lost his grip on his precious and fragile sense of self, the being lashed out instinctively.

The attack ceased.

The being repaired its own body. Its mind, though, was in turmoil, and would take far longer to fix. The broken corpse of Neville Albert Miller lay at its feet. His thoughts had ended, but an echo of them lived on in the being's mind.

It tried to come to terms with the idea of death, but knew that Neville Albert Miller had been unable to fully do so in all of his eighty-two years. It did realise one thing. Neville Albert Miller had not wanted to die. Somehow, the fact that he had done so became very poignant indeed. The being discovered misery and regret, and a deep, gnawing sense of guilt.

It had a great deal to learn, if it was to save this world.

At school, Dorothea became Dodo. It was a change, not only of name but of identity, to which she was well accustomed. Dodo wasn't bright enough for grammar school, but Dorothea, with the table manners and well-rounded vowels which Aunt Margaret had drummed into her, would have been out of place in a secondary modern playground.

At first, she had been a target for ridicule: the new kid, arriving mid-year, withdrawn. 'Dodo' had been an unflattering nickname, coined on the spurious grounds that her north-of-London accent marked her out as stupid. It was safer than

being called stuck-up. Once she had settled in and started to put the tragedy behind her, she had embraced the name and worked with cheer and enthusiasm (and the nearest she could manage to a southern accent) to change its connotations. She was on the fringes of 'the scene' now, kept out only because her great-aunt had banned her from those 'new-fangled' discotheques. Janet and the other girls likened Dodo to Rita Tushingham, which pleased her, although she felt herself too awkward and self-conscious for the comparison to be accurate.

Janet walked with her now, applying forbidden make-up to her face as they put the granite bunker of school behind them. Soon, Dodo would do that for the final time; would have done so already if Aunt Margaret hadn't insisted she stay on and work towards a university place. What was the point of leaving anyway? She had nowhere better to go.

'You should tell the old bag,' declared Janet. 'It's 1965, innit? Just 'cos she's an old fogey who don't know 'ow to 'ave a good time!'

Dodo smiled wistfully at the idea of such a rebellion. But she was already undoing her tie and reknitting it more neatly, becoming Dorothea again. 'It wouldn't be worth the hassle,' she said. 'Aunt Margaret'd have a nark on for weeks! School night, an' all that.'

'You'll be missin' a treat, sister. That John Smith's gear!'

'A bit past it, I thought.'

'But those Common Men are to die for!'

The two girls giggled over the relative merits of each member of Janet's preferred pop group, until they neared Aunt Margaret's house. There, Dodo came to a sudden stop, as memories of the morning's brief diversion flooded back into her mind.

Three trucks stood at the kerbside, green in colour and marked with army insignia. Dodo could see at least eight soldiers, talking in their vehicles or knocking on doors further up the road. She broke into a run, and passed the flaking blue window frames of home without a glance. She was wrong to have dismissed the green light so easily. If the army was here, then it had to have been significant.

A soldier blocked the girls' way. He was young and fit, and Dodo noticed (as if she couldn't have guessed) that he met with Janet's approval. 'Sorry, ladies, I can't let you pass.'

'But I live on the other side of the common,' Janet protested.

'You'll have to go round, love. Common's sealed off.'

'What's happening?' asked Dodo, heart pounding.

'Nothing to concern you. Just army business.'

Dodo drew herself up to her full height, which, admittedly, was not too impressive. She put on Dorothea's voice. Though unable to afford private schools, Aunt Margaret had considered elocution lessons to be essential, and Dodo was just beginning to see the point of them. 'Could you not let us past, sir? We wouldn't get in anybody's way, I promise. We only want to cut through.'

'Sorry, love,' said the soldier, to Dodo's intense disappointment. 'More'n my job's worth, that'd be.'

Dodo spent the evening with nerves charged by impatience. She could not settle to homework, and her great-aunt scolded her for daydreaming when she should have been about her chores. Her theory was that modern music had begun to rot the girl's brain. When the doorbell rang at last, Dodo leapt as if shocked. The plate she had been drying crashed onto the draining board.

She peered around the kitchen door as Aunt Margaret greeted two soldiers on the step. She strained to catch every word of their conversation. They asked Aunt Margaret who else lived here, and whether she had seen anything out of the ordinary. She hadn't, of course. The visitors gave nothing away and, to Dodo's frustration, her great-aunt didn't even ask.

The soldiers turned to leave, taking Dodo's dreams of adventure with them. On impulse, she rushed into the hall to stop them

'I saw something!'

The soldiers halted. Aunt Margaret gave Dodo a withering look that said the army had better things to do than listen to her. She ignored it, and gushed: 'I saw the light. You know, the green light. In the sky, this morning.'

The soldiers exchanged a glance, then one said: 'I see, miss. And what time would this have been?'

'About a quarter past six. I remember it because the song thrush had just woken up; the one that lives in the guttering at Number 36.'

'We've had no reports of a green light, miss. Are you quite sure you didn't dream it?'

'Dorothea is a fanciful child,' said Aunt Margaret apologetically

'I was not dreaming!' she said stubbornly

'All the same,' said the soldier, 'we are looking for something a bit more substantial than lights.'

'Of course you are,' said Aunt Margaret, with an understanding nod. 'Dorothea is sorry to have wasted your time.'

School was a nightmare, the next day. Not only was everyone talking about last night's gig, but Janet had told them all about the soldiers in Dodo's road. They wanted to know more. Dodo tried to inject some life into the story: the younger kids took to her idea of a cover-up, and rumours of flying saucers filled the playground, fuelled by reports that the American probe had made its landing on the moon. But, to Dodo, it was just another dull chapter in a dull life. Shari Reynolds poured scorn too. She theorised that a manhunt was under way; was cruel enough to suggest that Dodo's father, escaped from an asylum somewhere, was its target. Dodo punched her for that, and was given detention by her form teacher.

By the time she returned home, the soldiers had gone. She wandered about the common for a short time, but found nothing of interest. Nor did she expect to. She was late for dinner, and Aunt Margaret created a fuss. Dodo was forced to explain why she had been kept behind, secretly thinking the old battle-axe would at least be relieved that she had not been out enjoying herself.

The *Standard* had arrived, and she took it to her room on the pretext of needing it for English homework. She looked for clues to the army's reason for being in her neighbourhood. She didn't expect to find much, but the fact that the incident was not reported at all surprised and perplexed her. Perhaps there really had been a cover-up of some sort?

If so, what could a sixteen-year-old schoolgirl do about it?

Dodo was sliding back into a pit of depression, when a story caught her eye. It was sequestered in the middle of the newspaper, its headline barely larger than the body text. She had passed over it at first, seeing that it concerned not

London but the relatively distant city of New York. But the story told of how, in its writer's words, 'silly season' had broken out in downtown Manhattan. Over the past week, police and the media had received far more than their usual quota of reports of ghosts, faith healers, mystics, alien objects and grotesque beings capable of taking human form.

And, Dodo read with mounting excitement, green lights in the sky.

Henry Wilkes sat in a smoky bar and stared into his glass of beer.

He mourned what his new life had come to; knew that, if he was to lift that glass and drink its sweet, tempting contents, he would tip himself over the precipice on which he teetered. No third chances.

But what had he to hang on for?

He had tried, he had really tried, but, with neither job nor money, he had had no chance of finding a home. Landlords of even the dingiest, most squalid rooms had demanded deposits and references, and Henry Wilkes had no friends left. Disheartened, he had returned to the Bowery, and, for the first time, had seen it for the stinking slum it was. Worse, the derelicts there had shunned or abused him, the upper-class gent in neat clothes. He had felt out of place.

So, after a further day of polite excuses and shrugged shoulders from the fresh-faced nobodies who inhabited employment centres and welfare offices, Henry Wilkes had found himself a new place to sleep: beneath a skeletal bush in Central Park. A gang of rowdy youths, drinking and smoking and cackling at coarse jokes, had kept him awake all night. He had not dared twitch for fear of being discovered and gutted.

On the third day of his new life, people had begun to steer clear of Henry Wilkes again. He had grass stains, mud and sweat on his only clothes. He had begun to smell. The rejections had become less polite, his efforts consequently less enthusiastic. He had spent the night in police cells, after being picked up on a charge of vagrancy. The officers had recognised him, and had taunted him about his dishevelled suit. 'Come up in the world, have we, Henry?'

The fourth day had led him to this bar.

Henry Wilkes cursed his miracle, knowing now that it had left him no better off than before; merely clear-headed and

aware of each reason to despair. A part of himself begged him to find strength to carry on. A greater part only bemoaned the fact that he was younger now, and further from death, but too cowardly to bring the moment forward. Tired and starving, he had bummed a few dollars off reluctant passers-by on Park Avenue, and had brought them here. To the precipice.

In the end, it didn't take much conscious thought. In truth, Henry Wilkes had made his decision before he had walked through the door; before he had even begun to collect the money with which to do this to himself.

He feared only that the booze might not affect him any more. Within moments, that fear was allayed. As the beer slid down his throat and caressed his stomach, he knew that the lonely hole was still there; that the golden-haired man had merely plugged it with ice, which easily melted in a warm and friendly glow. A second and third drink caused a haze to descend upon Henry Wilkes's mind, and half of him smiled at the prospect of the end of painful, conscious thought – while the other half cried.

Dodo spent Thursday in a pensive mood. She reined in her more fanciful notions – she was too mature to believe in spaceships – but she was sure now that she was not imagining everything. Something was going on, and the authorities didn't want anyone to know about it. In her most optimistic moments, she felt as if she was on the verge of an escape from mundanity. The rest of the time, she ached with the certainty that such escape was out of her reach. She resolved to search the common again, and to keep her eyes and ears open. Perhaps she would be lucky. What else could she do?

In the meantime, she had a routine to endure.

She called at home only briefly, to shrug off her school uniform and to don the short skirt and thigh-length boots that had been the cause of a ferocious row with Aunt Margaret two weeks earlier. As a concession towards modesty and the season, she slipped into a long overcoat before hurrying out again.

It had been her great-aunt's idea that, each Thursday afternoon, Dodo should shop for an elderly neighbour. She kept this a secret from Janet and Shari and the others, who would have considered it uncool. She didn't mind, though. Mr

Miller was a sweet old man, and Dodo liked him. He had travelled far and wide with the air force, and she enjoyed hearing his anecdotes over tea and digestive biscuits, even if they made her long all the more for what she could not have.

Today, for the first time, Mr Miller didn't answer his door.

Dodo – Dorothea, rather, for this facet of her life – stood on the step for all of five minutes, knocking repeatedly and calling through the letterbox. Mr Miller was a little deaf, and he rarely left the house, particularly not when he was expecting the infrequent pleasure of company. She was puzzled, and then worried. An image flashed into her mind of Mr Miller lying, unmoving, on his living room floor. She had to investigate. He might need her help.

Dodo turned to the bay windows, but the curtains were drawn (in the middle of the day?) and she could not see beyond. She moved around them, searching for a gap. She came up short, alarmed, as she reached the far right pane and saw what she had not seen before.

The glass had been smashed.

Dodo hesitated, mentally painting gory pictures of what the curtain might conceal. Her heart was heavy with dread. She didn't want to learn the truth. She had to. She reached out, gripped the soft fabric between finger and thumb, and slowly drew it back.

Dodo screamed and recoiled.

A second later, she composed herself, pulled the curtain back again – more decisively this time – and forced a nervous laugh.

'Mr Miller, what on earth are you doing there?'

Mr Miller was standing at the window, staring directly at Dodo with sightless eyes. His skin was pale, his posture somehow crooked. He looked haggard. Something had certainly happened to him. Intruders in the night, Dodo suspected. He was alive, at least.

'Didn't you hear me knocking?'

No answer. In shock, she thought. Poor dear. She noticed that, behind him, a chair had been pulled up close to the television set. *Play School* blared out at an uncomfortable volume.

'Well, are you going to let me in?'

Mr Miller blinked.

Dodo sighed, and hauled herself through the window. Her heels ground tiny shards of glass into the threadbare carpet.

Mr Miller didn't move, and she found herself pressing up against him as she negotiated a path into the room proper. His breath was hot and wet on her forehead. Her boots had started to stick to the floor and, when Dodo looked down, she swallowed dryly at the sight of a large, dark stain. She cast a glance back at Mr Miller, but he didn't seem to be bleeding. He had turned to face her, his expression still blank.

'It's all right, Mr Miller,' she said with forced cheer. 'I'm here now. Why don't you sit down? I'll fetch us a brew, and you can tell me all about what's happened. I can help.'

He didn't respond, and Dodo made a somewhat awkward exit to the kitchen. She was out of her depth here. She should go to the telephone box and call the police, maybe even an ambulance, but it would mean leaving Mr Miller alone, and what if she disturbed them for nothing?

She filled the kettle and lit a ring on the stove. She knew the old man better than anyone did. Perhaps, with a hot drink inside him, he might be able to open up to her. Perhaps it wouldn't be so bad.

The being in Neville Albert Miller's form stared at the open living room door, and listened to the clatter of cups from the kitchen. It was too soon for this. It had spent long hours absorbing information from Neville's miraculous window on the world, but human interactions were a complex area in which it was not yet ready to experiment.

But the girl had seen it now. What if she had recognised its nature? If there was one thing the being had learned from lurid, late-night science-fiction films, it was the paranoid hatred that humankind held for all things alien. If its presence was revealed, before it was prepared, then no doubt they would hunt it down until they found its weakness and slaughtered it.

The girl – Dorothea, as Neville remembered her – must not leave. And, if that meant bringing a premature end to a second life, then the being could not allow itself to be stayed by human qualms.

Dorothea's death would be for this world's good.

Chapter Two

MIRACLE ON WALL STREET

Manhattan. The medical establishment is baffled by the case of New Yorker Richard Casey, blind since an industrial accident three years ago, who has suddenly regained his sight. Mr Casey puts his recovery down to the 'healing hands' of a group of strangers, whom he encountered in the Wall Street area. However, Doctor Scott McRaney commented that similar cases of tissue regeneration have been documented before, albeit rarely.

New York Ranger, Thursday March 25, 1965 (p49)

'Here you are, Mr Miller. A nice hot cup of tea, that should steady your nerves.'

Dodo made an effort to smile as she returned to Mr Miller's living room. He responded, at least. He crossed the room to join her. Dodo saw too late that his walk was a purposeful stride; that his expression was grim and his eyes cold. She backed away and opened her mouth to speak, but Mr Miller's hand was around her throat and he was actually lifting her, pinning her to the flower-patterned wallpaper. He was strong, and Dodo found it difficult to catch breath. She lost control of her muscles. Scalding tea sloshed onto her legs as two heavy mugs clumped to the floor.

So incongruous was the situation – such was Dodo's incredulity – that she could not respond for vital seconds. Then a panic-stricken voice in her mind hammered home the fact that Mr Miller was trying to kill her, and had the ability to do it.

She squirmed and tried to break free, but his fingers were like a vice. She tore at them, trying to loosen their grip. Mr Miller only squeezed more tightly.

Dark shapes impinged upon Dodo's field of vision. With an odd sense of detachment, she recognised that she was losing consciousness. She couldn't even draw a decent breath to scream.

Mr Miller recoiled, as if struck in the face. Unsupported, Dodo crumpled. She should have jumped back up, should have run, but all her concentration was required for the act of respiration. She sucked in air gratefully and, as her lungs became less demanding at last, she wiped tears from her eyes and looked for her erstwhile attacker.

He was back at the window, leaning against the wall, shaking his head as he mumbled words that Dodo could not hear. He seemed to have shrunk in stature. He seemed like the old Mr Miller now, but Dodo couldn't trust him. He was not in his right mind. She would call the police. They would deal with him; help him.

She struggled to her feet, feeling her way up with hands behind her back, not taking her eyes off him. She fumbled for the doorknob. He turned and saw her, and he riveted her to the spot with his stare.

Dodo saw Mr Miller for what he was then: not the kind, lonely pensioner with whom she had chatted for many an hour, but a monster. His face was overcast, as if his features had retreated into shadowy nooks. His limbs had become gnarled, his fingers twisting into claws. His back was hunched, his lips had curled into an evil sneer, and his eyes (oh, those eyes!) burnt into her brain with an infernal power.

A monster. Lumbering towards her.

Dodo found her voice and screamed. And ran.

She ran into the hallway, but Mr Miller sprang after her with feral speed.

She hit the front door and rebounded, co-ordination sacrificed to desperation. The key was in its lock. It felt tiny in her huge, clumsy hands. She whimpered as she knew that she had run out of time.

Mr Miller was upon her. He tore her away from the door, placing himself between Dodo and her longed-for escape. She swallowed, suppressing another scream, and backed up against the newel post at the bottom of the stairs, tensing herself. She could at least be ready for him this time.

But he did not attack again. To Dodo's surprise, his expression was one of sadness. He didn't look like a monster now. Perhaps he never had. Much as it galled her to admit it, her great-aunt had been right about her imagination. But she hadn't imagined being almost choked to death.

'I cannot allow you to leave,' said Mr Miller – or rather, the person or thing in his form. For his doleful, husky voice gave

Dodo the distinct, if somewhat bizarre, impression that this was not her old friend. 'I am sorry,' he added, making it sound like an afterthought.

'What are you going to do to me?' asked Dodo, trying hard to be brave.

'Nothing,' he said calmly. 'I do not wish to kill if I can avoid it. I will keep you safe, so long as you remain in this house.'

'For how long?' Dodo asked. She was hit by an unwelcome image of Aunt Margaret, laying out dinner and checking the kitchen clock with an impatient tap of her foot.

'However long it takes.'

'What are you?' The question came unbidden, but there was a powerful, primal fear attached to it: a fear of any situation in which the question had to be asked. The fear reduced her words to a whisper.

The ersatz Mr Miller didn't answer at first. He didn't appear to know how. His brow furrowed in thought. When next he did speak, he spread out his hands and opened his eyes wide in a mute gesture of appeal. A plea to be believed.

'I am here,' he said, 'to save your world.'

Rain lashed the windscreen of the old, orange Volkswagen Beetle. The water made fuzzy patterns out of Manhattan's street lights and performed a deafening drum roll on the tin roof. Professor Byron Carter felt exposed, unable to detect anything beyond this metal prison, but sure that the rest of the world could look in. As if to complete his sensory deprivation, Kathy Marchant leant back in the driver's seat to his left, and lit a cigarette. A cloud of acrid smoke clawed at the back of his throat.

'I don't know how you can still use those things. Don't you watch the news?'

'I just make it,' Kathy grunted, 'and I've learned not to trust every nut that says he's got a theory.'

'But, in this case, the scientific evidence –'

'Yeah, yeah, sure. But you didn't come here to discuss my health, did you?'

'No,' said Carter nervously. He had been attempting to delay the moment of betrayal. 'No,' he said again. He looked at her, as if hoping to experience a blinding revelation; to see some heaven-sent sign that he could trust this woman completely.

Kathy Marchant was in her early twenties, but dressed older. Her make-up was stark and white, and seemed to deliberately accentuate the harsh lines of her face. Carter had not seen her smile yet. She was just what he had expected from her reputation: a female version of the stereotypical hard-bitten New York hack. That unnerved him. He had suffered many nightmares about this day, and the realisation of even one aspect of them encouraged him to believe that the rest could come true too.

‘So? My time is precious, buddy. If you’ve got something to say, spit it out!’

‘You – you wrote those articles for the *Ranger*, didn’t you? About the UFOs.’

‘Surprised you noticed ‘em.’ The reporter’s voice was bitter. ‘They didn’t exactly make the front page.’

‘No. Well, my employers like to downplay events of that nature – and yours have learned how to keep on their good side.’

Kathy raised an eyebrow. Carter had the impression that she had been trying to appear less interested than she was. ‘They’re hiding something?’

He nodded vigorously, keen now to let the details spill out, before his anxieties caught up with his tongue and paralysed it again. ‘Something happened. Last Friday.’

‘Green lights in the sky...’

‘That’s right. I saw the phenomenon myself, but the official line was that we had to deny all knowledge. The same directive went to the police. A few days ago, I found out why. Something came down in the city.’

As if by habit, Kathy produced a notebook and a stubby pencil from her trench coat. She played with them absently, too engrossed in Carter’s revelations to use them. ‘Anything recovered?’

Carter shook his head. ‘Not at the New York site. But the same thing happened in London, three nights later. This time, we were prepared. The alien ship crash-landed. The British Army recovered wreckage. Last I heard, it was on its way here to be examined.’

‘Who’s in charge of the operation?’

Carter hadn’t anticipated that question. ‘I – I don’t know. They’re flying in someone from Washington, I think. Top brass.’

Kathy nodded thoughtfully, and chewed the end of her pencil. 'You haven't brought me any proof, though, have you? I mean, nothing I can use.'

And Carter's doubts came rushing back to him.

The crashing of the rain seemed to grow until it enveloped his world. He thought about what he had said, and felt hot sweat on his skin. He had disobeyed orders, broken promises – contracts, even – and, though he had agonised over so doing, he still prayed that he had chosen the greater good; that God would forgive him, and his government would simply not find out. How hollow his prayer, if it transpired that he had compromised himself for no purpose?

'It's just,' expounded Kathy, 'you can imagine what my editor'll say when I hand him all this. Little green men in the Big Apple, a source who won't go on record –'

'It's true,' protested Carter feebly.

'Not the issue. I need more. Lots more. I can dig around from my end, but you're on the inside. I need you to keep in touch; find out what you can.'

Carter wanted to protest. He had done his part already. He had made the bravest decision of his life, and had followed it through to find that he had only taken the first step. He couldn't go further. His job was at stake. He was risking prison. He had told the newspapers where to look. Wasn't it their job to do the rest? Well, wasn't it?

His throat was too dry to speak. He felt detached, and he looked in horror at the sight of his own head nodding in meek submission in the rear view mirror.

Despite the weather, Carter turned down Kathy Marchant's offer of a lift. He walked back to the subway with shoulders stooped and hands deep in his pockets. He had expected to feel liberated. No soldiers had come tramping out of the darkness. There had been no screaming of sirens. Nor had there been a well-placed shot from a passing, unidentifiable vehicle. His betrayal had gone undetected. But it wasn't over yet. He was a traitor now. He'd have to live with the fear of discovery until it became an actuality, or until he died.

Amidst his other worries, Carter tried not to think about the aliens; about the terrifying implications that their existence might have for his faith, his wellbeing and his cosy little world-view. If he could break the conspiracy of silence, let the public know what was out there, then his knowledge would

be less of a burden, at least. He could turn to others for guidance and reassurance.

Until then, he was alone and afraid.

Dodo spent most of Thursday night in Mr Miller's spare bedroom. She sat on the bed, fully dressed – she didn't even unbutton her coat – knees drawn up to her chest, concocting escape plans but concluding, in each case, that the risk was too great.

At four the next morning, she rose and crept onto the landing, feeling restless and wanting to know what her captor was doing. She could hear an insistent crackling sound: static from the TV set. Of course, all three channels would have stopped broadcasting long ago.

She tiptoed downstairs, alert for sounds of movement but unable to hear much over the pounding of her heart. She passed the front door. She had dared to try it earlier, but it was locked and her captor had removed the key. She hesitated on the threshold of the living room. A chill breeze wafted through the broken window and caressed her cheek with the promise of freedom. The only way out. But the thing in Mr Miller's form was there. Light from the TV screen outlined his silhouette with a grey halo. He had his back to her, but his breathing was deep and regular. Asleep. What if she disturbed him?

Minutes passed before Dodo moved again – minutes during which she considered the consequences of being caught; considered even fetching a knife from the kitchen, but knew that she would have neither the strength nor the will to use it.

She was so close. Escaping would be easy. Why could she not convince herself of that?

Dodo took a tentative step into the room. Paused. Took another. The thing didn't move.

She swallowed, and set her sights on the window. He had drawn the curtain again. It fluttered gently. She picked up speed as she approached it. She eased it back. She laid a hand on the wooden frame beyond. She glanced over her shoulder.

He was staring at her. His eyes were living lights in the darkness.

She gasped, and thought she was going to faint.

'If you attempt to leave,' he said in a dull, matter-of-fact tone, 'I will kill you.'

Dodo believed him. She believed that, no matter how fast she ran, he would catch her. No matter how hard she struggled, he would win. She didn't know where the belief came from, but it overrode the screaming commands in her brain to just flee.

She took her hand off the window frame.

The thing in Mr Miller's form watched as Dodo padded slowly back to the stairs, expecting retribution at any second; panting with relief as she regained the spare room unharmed. She did not dare to leave it until Friday morning was well underway. Then her rebellious spirit rose again and told her to do something.

Her captor was still downstairs, she was sure of that. So it seemed safe enough to explore the upstairs rooms. Pointless, perhaps – but she might find something.

She did.

She found Mr Miller's corpse, sprawled across his unmade bed, limbs splayed as if he had been dropped from a great height, his emaciated face distorted by one final expression of horror. Dodo tried not to scream, but the unexpected stench turned her stomach and forced her mouth to open; to release the piercing sound.

She fled back into the spare room, and shook and wept and, only after a minute, realised that the thing downstairs had not heard her, or, more likely, had not cared.

The thing. Dodo shuddered at the thought. Unlikely as it had seemed, a part of her had clung to the hope that Mr Miller had only been seized by insanity. That he was still her friend, deep down. That he was human. She entertained no such illusions now.

As the day crawled by, Dodo began to feel ill with tension. Hunger and tiredness, too. There was a gnawing sickness in her stomach; an empty dizziness in her head. She thought about investigating Mr Miller's fridge, but it would have meant walking past the open door to the living room.

With an air of bitter cynicism, she inspected most of the upstairs windows. They opened only at the top. No chance of climbing through, even if she could knot together a rope from sheets. She could not bring herself to check the windows in Mr Miller's room.

Fatigue overcame her early in the afternoon. She was surprised to find herself waking from a troubled doze some three and a half hours later.

An hour after that, her captor came to see her.

Dodo froze as she heard his footsteps, approaching. She scrambled to her feet, and cast around desperately for something she could use as a weapon, regretting that she had not obtained a knife when she had had the chance. The best thing she could find was a heavy book, and the idea of her somehow beating him into submission with that was ludicrous.

Then it was too late.

He appeared in the doorway, and the book fell unnoticed from Dodo's hands as she stared at him. He had changed. He still had a look of Mr Miller in his face, but he was a much younger man now. His hair was long and full, his jaw strong and square. His body had bulked out considerably, and tight red clothing accentuated his new muscles. A strange symbol – a haphazard amalgam of two triangles, a circle and a rectangle – was emblazoned upon his chest in black.

He looked ridiculous. In another situation, Dodo would have laughed.

He studied her reaction to him. Then, in slow and halting speech, he asked: 'Do your people not need a figure like this to protect them?'

He was asking her advice? She could barely cope with the incongruity of it. Keep him talking, advised an inner voice; the part of herself that had picked up tips, without knowing it, from *Dixon of Dock Green*. 'I... that is... ah... no!' she spluttered.

His face crumpled, in what Dodo thought was a childlike way. 'The image is prevalent in your fiction. You seem to be crying out for one with the power to save you.'

'I... don't know what you're talking about.'

'I am here to help, Dorothea.' She flinched, as if physically struck, at this mention of her name. How could he know it? How dare he use it? 'I can be whatever you need me to be.'

'The only thing I need from you is for you to let me go.'

He didn't answer that. He pulled up a chair and sat down, deflated – in more ways than one. His body had shrunk to normal proportions and his costume hung more loosely now, taking on the appearance of a baggy tracksuit. Mr Miller's lines returned to his face and deepened. He looked lost, and,

in that moment, Dodo ceased to be afraid of him. A foolish move, she scolded herself inwardly. Remember what he's done. Tread carefully.

'What are you trying to do?' she asked.

'I am here to save your world.'

'Yes, so you've said – but what does that mean, exactly?'

He gave her a strange look. Confusion? Caution? Or was he somehow testing her? 'What do you need it to mean?'

Perhaps Mr Miller had failed the test.

'Who are you?' It seemed a safer question than the one she had asked him yesterday, but he was no less perplexed by it. 'I mean,' she added, 'what's your name?'

'I do need a name, don't I?' he said thoughtfully 'I will be Neville Albert Miller.'

'No!' There was more vehemence in Dodo's voice than she had intended.

'Then who would you like me to be?'

'You're doing it again. I don't want you to keep saying what you think I'd like to hear – I just want the truth!'

'I am what you need me to be. It is the only truth I know.'

'Were you what Mr Miller needed?' she exploded, regretting her outburst at once. She had let down her guard, allowed her temper to take over. He had lulled her into thinking herself safe, believing him harmless (and how could that be, when she knew what he had done?).

He only looked at the floor and said, as if ashamed: 'Neville Albert Miller attacked me. I did not know then that I was intruding in his home; that it would be wrong to end his life. I am very sorry, Dorothea. I cannot bring him back.'

'It's wrong to keep me prisoner too, you know.' She spoke gently, sympathetically. He brought that out in her, for some reason.

He shook his head. 'It is the lesser of evils. If I were to release you, men would come with torches and pitchforks. I cannot allow the mission to be jeopardised.'

Dodo was about to say something, but her captor buried his face in his hands, as if the pain of living had become too much. 'Why must I be confused?' he wailed. 'I am not meant to be alone!'

She went to him automatically, taking one of his big hands in both of hers. She didn't know what to say to comfort him

He looked at her, and there were tears on his cheeks. 'Tell me what to do,' he pleaded.

She saw him in a different way then. He was no monster, no evil body-snatcher. He was an angel, fallen from Heaven, wings burnt by the sun; badly injured but still determined to do all he could to help others.

They remained in that position together for what seemed like an age, until Dodo became apprehensive again and wondered what the fallen angel would do next. Eventually, he just rose and, with a last awkward glance at her, shuffled out of the room. She heard him descending the stairs and retaking his seat before the television. It occurred to her that he was using it to learn from, to find out about the world. Perhaps to replace the memories that had been seared away in his descent.

Dodo had plenty of time for her doubts to resurface, during the next hour. Still, she had been emboldened by her captor's brief visit. In her most optimistic moments, she could even feel a hint of excitement. She had wanted adventure; a break from monotony. She had certainly found that. She recalled one of Aunt Margaret's favourite phrases. Be careful what you wish for. Would she rather none of this had happened? She couldn't answer that. Not yet.

She needed to know what came next. So, hoping to force the issue, she joined her captor in the living room.

The evening news was showing pictures from Vietnam, alongside reactions to the week's revelation that the United States had used chemical weapons in that war-ravaged country. Despite her own predicament, Dodo felt sick – as she always did – at the sight of such pointless suffering.

'There's something you could do for us,' she pointed out. 'End the war. End all wars.'

'Does your race not desire such conflicts?' the thing asked.

'No. No, of course not.'

'Then how can they occur?'

'Well...' Dodo floundered. 'I don't know. Some people must want to fight, I suppose. Or feel they have to.'

He nodded pensively. 'You are asking me to side with those who do not wish to wage war against those who do.'

'No. Well, yes, I suppose. But you wanted to be a – a superhero or something, didn't you? You were going to fight crime? It's the same thing. People do evil things, and we have to stop them for the good of the majority. Killing is wrong; you said it yourself.'

He turned away from her quickly. 'Yes. I did.'

A long silence ensued, until Dodo succumbed to the urge to break it. 'Well? What do you think?'

'I will call myself Joseph,' he said.

'What?'

'Joseph. Do you not like it?'

'Yes,' she said. 'I suppose I do. But the war – what about that?'

'I shall consider what is best.'

Dodo left the room, shaking her head. She found this situation difficult; not so frightening any more, but certainly perplexing. Frustrating.

She thought about the name Joseph. It had pleasant connotations. Wisdom. Serenity. Innocence. It fitted well with the image she was beginning to form of its owner.

Or the image he wanted her to form.

Dodo frowned at the sudden suspicion that her captor might have plucked his new name out of her thoughts; given her, as he had so often said, just what she wanted – or needed.

Byron Carter stood at a nondescript door to a nondescript office, and felt like he was back in school and had been summoned to see the principal.

He had almost made it. Five minutes more, and then he would have left this grey, impersonal government building for another weekend, and perhaps felt for a while that he wasn't being watched at every turn. Five minutes more. But then the summons had come for him to report to the visiting bigwig: a general by the name of Marchant. And Carter had gone cold, knowing then that he had been ensnared.

He stood at the nondescript door, but could not bring himself to knock.

The door flew open, and Carter almost collapsed in terror. The general himself emerged: an imposing man, despite being an inch or more shorter than the gangling biophysicist. His thin, military moustache was neatly clipped, and his greying hair severely cropped. His face was narrow and alert, his eyes a piercing green. Carter felt as if he might have X-ray vision, and could see all his secrets laid bare. Not that he would have needed such a power; not with the information that Kathy – his daughter? his niece? – had no doubt given to him.

‘Carter?’ Marchant rapped.

Carter nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

‘Where have you been, man?’ Marchant didn’t wait for an answer. He strode briskly along the corridor, his cap and swagger stick tucked neatly beneath his left arm. Carter scurried to keep up with him, and waited for the axe to fall.

‘I’ve been looking at your records, Carter. Most impressive.’

‘I... thank you, sir.’

‘You’ve done sterling work on the effects of nerve gas, I hear.’

Carter nodded dumbly. What was the sadist trying to do? String him along? Soften him up for the killing blow? For the dismissal, the court case, the news reports that would brand him a traitor to his country, written up, no doubt, by Kathy Marchant?

‘Of course, I wouldn’t know about it myself. Leave all that to the boffins.’

Marchant barged through the door to the stairwell as if it wasn’t there. To Carter’s surprise, they took the upward flight.

‘But I’m told you’re one of the best, Carter, and I need someone good.’

Marchant threw him a sharp look then, which left Carter flustered. He was beginning to hope that the general didn’t know about his indiscretion after all, despite the coincidence of his surname. It was a long shot, but worth taking. He had to act naturally; give Marchant no cause for suspicion. ‘You want me to work on something for you, sir?’ His tongue felt numb, and his words sounded indistinct to him Marchant didn’t seem to notice.

‘Project Bluebird. High priority. Above top secret – you will be required to sign a new set of papers. Transfer effective immediately.’

They emerged onto the roof, and, instantly, Carter felt himself buffeted by air displacement as a helicopter set down in front of them.

He had been ensnared after all, just not in the way he had anticipated. Despite his promise to Kathy Marchant, Carter had hoped to go back to his everyday routine; forget about this whole alien business. Instead, he was en route to the heart of it.

On Saturday morning, Dodo woke to find Joseph climbing into her bed.

'What are you doing?' she cried, dragging herself away on her elbows, finding nowhere to go. He clamped a hand over her mouth – not roughly, but gently. He smiled at her, and the smile was warm and kind. It was all right, Dodo thought. She had been rudely woken, and had panicked unnecessarily. Nothing was wrong.

What was she thinking?

He was lying on top of her. She could feel his breath on her hair, smell skin that was clean and fragrant (though she had not seen him bathe). 'Do not struggle,' he cooed. 'I am not going to hurt you. I simply wish to express my affection, in the way that humans do.'

Dodo thrashed and kicked and tried to bite his smothering hand, but his strength was incredible. He held her still.

He looked a little hurt, but no less determined. 'I have observed your culture. I know this act is considered normal between best friends. You are my best friend. You have shown me tenderness. Why would you deny me this courtesy?'

He began to undo her top, clumsily, ripping a button from the fabric. Dodo's eyes filled with tears.

'I only want to experience; to understand.'

Then Joseph screamed.

And, suddenly, he was writhing on the floor. He cried with pain and clutched at his head as if it might burst. Dodo was reminded of how he had been likewise unable to kill her, when first they had met – as if her own resistance had given him pause – but this was different. He was in agony. She almost wanted to go to him, but what he had tried to do was too awful. She shrank away, wrapping sheets around herself as they might protect her.

Joseph scrambled unsteadily to his feet, and fairly toppled out of the room. Immediately, Dodo leapt out of bed. She thrust her feet into her boots and grabbed her coat from its peg behind the door. She pulled it on as she ran on to the landing, and saw that the front door was standing open. She raced down to it, hardly pausing to entertain the idea that Joseph might be waiting beyond. Her fear of what he might do if she tried to escape had vanished, subsumed by the greater fear of what he might do if she stayed. She had no time to consider, to plan; no time to even think about what

had just happened. The incident had been so brief that it was already beginning to feel like a dream, from which only the fear remained.

Dodo's only coherent thought, in that frantic half-minute, was to run.

By the time her faculties returned, she was outside in the crisp morning air, and Joseph was nowhere to be seen. She had turned away from her great-aunt's house (what help could she offer?) and towards the common. In the cyclone of her thoughts, she registered one thing above all that help was at hand, in a familiar, reassuring form. That Dodo hadn't seen this particular object before, didn't remember it being here, didn't matter in that moment.

She raced gratefully across Wimbledon Common, towards the police box.

New York City had suffered a miserable spring thus far. Much snow had fallen, but its white blanket had been fragile and threadbare. The wind was cruel and cutting, and, beneath its unrelenting onslaught, a familiar ache had returned to Henry Wilkes's bones. He welcomed it like an old friend, wallowing in his own discomfort as he trudged out of the flophouse and past the Bowery Savings Bank: an impressive but lonely monument to a district that had died.

When Henry encountered the five strangers again – he knew it was they who surrounded him, though he did not look up – a distant fear penetrated his alcoholic haze. What if they had come to cleanse him once more? Restore his nerve endings and force him to feel his pain all over again? Despite the dimming of his memory, the torture of recent days had left fresh scars.

'Don't...' he spluttered, his plea choked by a cascade of tears.

'Did we not give you what you needed?' asked the golden-haired leader. Henry recognised his mellifluous tones, tinged with disappointment. 'Why have you squandered our gift?'

He could not answer, much as he yearned to explain himself.

'His desires were not as he thought.' A woman's voice, like the tinkling of a harp. She sounded beautiful. 'He deceived himself, and so we too misread his longings.'

'And now?'

‘Now, Henry Wilkes desires – and deserves – but one thing.’

‘Yes.’ To Henry’s surprise, he spoke clearly. And thought clearly. The strangers could only make things better. What was the point in existing like this, now that he had no hope? Now that he had lost his grip, for a second time, upon the only life to which he might have aspired? ‘Yes,’ he whispered. He could see their plan for him now. They were going to give him what he wanted; what he had wanted, on some level, for eight years, though he had been too much of a coward to admit it.

The strangers were going to save Henry Wilkes.

This time, they were going to do it right.

A watery sun peered out from behind grey clouds, and illuminated one small block of the Bowery area for one special moment. Its rays caught drifting particles and seemed to impart a little of their light, so that the particles glimmered and danced like fairy dust. Then the sun was shrouded again, and selfish air currents swooped in to replace it.

Henry Wilkes’s remains were dispersed on the uncaring winds.

Chapter Three

FIRST SIGN [extract]

Why did they come to me? Who knows? They had powers we don't understand. Perhaps they knew, in some way, I was the best man for the job. They might have studied our world, and knew of my illustrious career. After all, only a few months before this happened, the Beatles took the States by storm. It was my proudest achievement, although some people have conspired to deny my part in it since then. Petty-minded, jealous microbes!

Anyway, it was to me they came – me, Alexander Lullington-Smythe, as I sat in my plush New York office suite. Of course, I was suspicious right away. Don't believe the so-called comedians who say I'm a gullible idiot or something, I never believed in half the things they claimed. In my business, you have to have a nose for this kind of thing, but my infallible instincts told me these four men and one woman were planning something big. I felt I owed it to the world to keep an eye on them, and that's why I decided to accept their proposition.

I became the manager of the gods. How I Saved the World
by Alexander Lullington-Smythe,
pub. Aphrodite Ltd, 1976

Dodo's first impression of New York was that it was smaller than she had expected.

No, not smaller. More confined. The streets were narrower than those of home, the buildings packed more tightly. But, when Dodo looked up, she could see those same buildings towering above her. Through a curtain of drizzle, the distant sky was barely visible. She almost felt claustrophobic, but the sheer thrill of being in a foreign locale, of its unique atmosphere, counteracted the effect. It was early morning – time on the East Coast of America ran five hours behind that in Wimbledon, if she remembered correctly – but the air tingled, as if the city was poised to explode into action.

This was like a vivid dream, but it was real. Dodo had dreamt it often enough to know the difference.

The past hour had been like that: a whirlwind of incredible experiences. There had been Joseph, of course, and his attempt to... to do what he had tried to do. But even that seemed distant now, as if had happened to somebody else. There simply hadn't been time for it to sink in. Not since Dodo's frenzied dash for freedom and the police box that had opened at her touch and allowed her into a magical realm.

The police box, she now knew, was a shell, containing the most fantastic thing she had ever seen. At her first glimpse of the white, oversized, futuristic control room, she had panicked; had even imagined, for a giddy, insane second, that she had escaped from Joseph to run headlong into his spaceship. She had blurted out some story about wanting to call the police (she couldn't recall the reason she had given now), speaking in her roughest, most common playground voice. The machine's owner – a white-haired old man in prehistoric dress (long, black jacket, checked trousers and a cravat) – had dismissed her as an unimportant child, as she had hoped. But, by now, she had calmed down; had begun to feel both safe (why was that?) and curious (well, nothing unusual there).

The old man had told Dodo to leave, but she had reeled off questions instead, obstreperous as she could be when she set her mind on something. His answers had been vague. He had called himself a 'doctor of science', which presumably made him the machine's inventor. But further interrogation had been forestalled by the inventor's assistant – Steven – who had charged in, shouting something about policemen. The old man had operated a series of controls on a hexagonal bank, and an argument had ensued; one that made a lot more sense in retrospect, now that Dodo knew what the 'police box' was capable of.

The 'doctor' had not wanted the local bobbies to stumble upon his machine. He had decided to move it, but Steven had protested about their taking a teenaged girl with them. Not that Dodo had minded. She had waited years for a fairy-tale chance like this. Her parents, she had told the men, were dead, and her great-aunt didn't care what she did (a slight exaggeration). She wished to go with them. Steven had tried to put her off with some stupid yarn about travelling into space (was he one of those embarrassing squares who

thought kids needed to be patronised?), but the inventor had taken to her, and the decision appeared to be his.

Thus, Dodo found herself stepping out of the police box (which, from the outside, really was as small as it had seemed back home, so that was something else to wonder about) in New York City; after only twenty minutes. And, though the Doctor – his only name, apparently – and Steven were busy fussing inside, complaining that the machine hadn't worked properly, she was overjoyed with what it had achieved.

This still seemed like a dream, but at least it was a happy one now.

Byron Carter cupped cold water onto his face, and hoped for the shock to snap his neurons into action. He reached for the towel, and ended up using it to stifle a yawn. He had always found it hard to sleep in a strange bed. A strange bed in a strange place where strange projects were being undertaken had guaranteed a restless night.

He remembered how alone he had felt with his knowledge and his betrayal, in Kathy Marchant's Beetle two nights earlier. It was worse now He had felt it most keenly as the helicopter had dipped towards an evergreen blanket, broken through, and descended into a steep-sided valley, in the arms of which nestled the single overgrown runway and few scattered buildings of Rogers Air Force Base. The once-abandoned facility had been alight with activity, and Carter had realised that, buried as it was between the high peaks of the Catskill Mountains, it was almost perfectly isolated.

Isolated.

He had not even been allowed to send a telegram. Officials had been despatched to his Forest Hills home to collect clothing and toiletries. What would his mother be thinking?

God was testing him.

Carter dressed in his smart blue suit, but his hands trembled as he tried to knot his tie. He inspected himself in the grease-spotted mirror on the wardrobe door. His thinning white hair needed work: it protruded at all angles. His thick, plastic-rimmed spectacles magnified the puffy sacks beneath his eyes. He had buttoned his shirt up wrong. Forty-two years old and he was scared of a man like General Marchant. But

he had to create a good impression. He had to buckle down, do his job without thinking too hard about it. Keep his secret.

Carter left his quarters, half-presentable, in time to snatch a quick cup of coffee in the mess. The clattering of cutlery, the jugs of water on foldaway tables and the atmosphere of the dimly-lit hall reminded him of school dinners.

The briefing was scheduled to begin at 0700. Marchant arrived at precisely that time. He marched into the lecture theatre without a glance at Carter nor his four fellow pressganged scientists, scattered across the front two rows. The general slapped a file down onto the lectern, but spoke without referring to it. His steely green eyes swept the room, and locked on to each of its occupants in turn. They seemed to bear down upon Carter for longest.

Carter did his best to appear surprised as Marchant told of the landings in New York and London. Not to overdo it – rumours had been circulating for a week – but Marchant must not know of the conversations he had overheard. The general confirmed that no wreckage, no burn marks, no evidence whatsoever, had been collected from the New York site. But, from London, a great deal had been salvaged.

The burnt-out husk of an alien vessel had been brought back to Rogers. So too had something that had been flung clear of the crash site – and, at this revelation, Byron Carter's jaw dropped open in his first true display of astonishment.

And fear.

Boards lay over the windows, while multi-coloured glass fragments littered the floor. Still, daylight filtered into the old church, finding its way through cracks in the roof. The elements had managed to gain entrance too, and wooden benches warped and rotted in stagnant pools. A concrete step led up to the old altar, defiled now by racist graffiti and stale urine. All else had been stripped out by vandals. Dust clung to every surface, and an odour of decay caused Alexander Lullington-Smythe's nose to wrinkle involuntarily. His breathing was ragged, and he hoped the dust would not precipitate an asthma attack. Not now.

'Well, what it looks like inside doesn't matter,' he said, attempting to justify his choice. 'It's what the exterior says to people.'

He looked to his new-found client for a reaction, but found none. Max was busy picking fluff from his immaculately

tailored grey suit. He adjusted his fashionable sunglasses, and Smythe wondered, not the first time, why he wore them in this gloom. Max was smiling, but then his thin, bloodless lips were always curled slightly upwards. He had a predator's smile, and it meant nothing.

'I'm sure,' said Max in measured tones, 'we can find a more salubrious base of operations once we begin to show a profit.'

Smythe grinned with relief. They were on the same wavelength after all. Not all of his past associates had been so understanding. 'I do think it's a good idea to use a church,' he enthused. Of course he did – it had been *his* idea. 'The symbolism could be useful. It's as I said before: if you want to convince people of this, ah, story of yours, you've got to present the right image. It will say more about you than words ever could.'

'So humans once came here to worship?'

Smythe kept his grin, but only with an effort. It wasn't the first time Max or one of his four colleagues had asked such a ridiculous question. 'In their droves,' he lied easily. 'I remember when SoHo revolved around this church. You could hear its bells as far north as Madison Square Park.' In fact, he had only discovered the building a few months earlier, when a small financial embarrassment had forced him to scour the slums for new business premises. He had no idea of its history, nor even of the name that it must once have possessed. 'A shame it has come to this sad state, but... well, I don't need to tell you what's happened to New York in the past decade.'

Max looked at Smythe as if he did.

'There's only the best of us left now. The sharpest of the entrepreneurs, the ones with guts and determination. We'll drag this city back up by its bootstraps, you mark my words!'

'If you believe this is the best place for us,' said Max, 'then I am sure you are right. You have the expertise in these matters.'

Alexander Lullington-Smythe decided that he liked Max very much indeed.

'It was a fortunate day for us when you found us in that alleyway.'

Smythe coughed nervously. 'I just happened to be passing. On the way to see one of my clients, you see.' And not, he told himself, absolutely not searching the streets for

the people who had sparked off recent rumours. He was not so desperate yet. And, anyway, if his efforts had paid off, then it couldn't have been such a desperate thing to do, could it? More a sound business decision. These people needed him, more than he needed them.

'To whom would they have prayed?'

Smythe looked at his client blankly, shaken out of his introspection.

'Those who came to this church,' Max prompted. 'To whom would they have prayed?'

'Well... God, of course. Who else did you have in mind?'

Max nodded thoughtfully.

The travelling machine had deposited its occupants outside a launderette on West 25th Street. Once the Doctor and Steven had finally emerged, the latter had announced his intention to explore alone, to which the Doctor had willingly agreed. Dodo had sensed some tension between the pair, but had soon forgotten about it.

New York had woken up around her, and she joyfully witnessed its myriad delights. The weather hardly bothered her. When the intermittent showers became too much, she and the Doctor just moved indoors and investigated a shop or a mall. Nor did the Doctor complain. He watched on like an indulgent elderly relative, wrapped in a heavy black cape and indicating points of interest with a stout walking cane.

They never stayed too long in one place. Every inch of the city felt different to the last, and Dodo was keen to experience them all. She had revised her opinion of New York now. It was huge. It needed to be, to accommodate all the facets of life that had been squeezed into its borders.

She wanted to see the Statue of Liberty, so the Doctor hailed a taxicab and asked to be taken to Battery Park via the World Trade Center. The driver didn't know where the latter was, and the Doctor's face fell. He muttered something to himself about what a stupid, forgetful old man he was, and how he would have to come back in five years' time. Dodo felt sorry for him. He was obviously a little senile. She smiled, to show that his lapse didn't matter. She liked him. How could she not, when he had given her all this?

Outside the park, the Doctor fumbled through his pockets and confessed that he had no money. As the driver's expression became thunderous and his language choice, an

embarrassed Dodo asked if he would accept pounds, shillings and pence. The Doctor produced a quill pen which, he suggested beguilingly, had once belonged to William Shakespeare and was of inestimable value. The cabby snatched it from his hands with bad grace, and decided to cut his losses. He departed with a deliberate squeal of tyres.

Dodo looked at the Doctor sympathetically. 'Was it really worth that much?'

'I can always replace it,' he replied with a wistful expression.

They strolled through Battery Park, passing through Castle Clinton, the ruined watchtower turned monument. Looking out across New York Bay, they could see Lady Liberty, smaller and further away than Dodo had imagined. Despite the inclement weather, a ragged queue stretched across the near bank, awaiting a boat to ferry them to the statue. The Doctor asked Dodo if she wanted to join it, but the return journey would have taken too long. She fully expected this wonderful opportunity to end at any moment – to be snatched from her like everything else – and she wanted to see as much as she could first. Anyway, a small charge was levied, and she didn't want to go through that rigmarole again.

For the same reason, she didn't mention how the scent of cooking meat from a nearby vendor was making her sick with hunger. She tried to remember the last time she had eaten, and felt even sicker when that train of thought returned her to the memory of an ordeal that, for a blissful time, had been pushed out of her mind.

She hadn't told anyone about Joseph yet. What if he harmed somebody else? What if he was connected, somehow, to the Doctor after all? Dodo couldn't see how, but the coincidence of her having had two such outlandish experiences in quick succession was immense. Every fibre of her being told her to trust this kindly inventor. But what if she was wrong?

To Dodo's surprise, the Doctor pushed a hot dog into her hand, as if he had read her mind (or heard her stomach, more like). Lost in thought, she hadn't seen him leave her side. She didn't like to ask what he had bartered with this time. She accepted the food gratefully, devouring it with manners of which Aunt Margaret would not have approved. The Doctor smiled benevolently. He laid out his cape so that

they could sit on the wet grass, in the shelter of Castle Clinton's front wall.

'I think I owe you an apology, young, er, young...' began the Doctor.

'Dorothea,' Dodo reminded him.

'Ah, of course.'

'What on earth for?'

He sighed. 'I can be a lonely and impulsive old man. You must forgive me, my dear. As young Steven has taken such pains to point out, I have spirited you away from your home and your family without so much as a by-your-leave.'

'I told you, I've got no family – no one who cares, anyway – and I wouldn't have missed this for the world.'

'It is kind of you to say so, Dorothea, very kind indeed. But, by an accident of my ship's functioning, I have not taken you too far. I can still arrange for you to fly home.'

'No!' The vehemence of Dodo's protest surprised even her. The idea of returning to a normal, boring life brought a stab of fear and loss to her guts. Her words tumbled over each other in their urgency to escape. 'This means everything to me. You can't know how often I've dreamed of being able to see things, go places – of having friends who share my interests and everything. Can't I travel with you, Doctor? Just for a while. I'll pay my way!'

She was appalled, at first, to see him laughing. But the laugh was not mockery; just a gentle, soft-hearted chuckle. 'Stubborn, inquisitive, adventurous. My dear, you remind me so much of my granddaughter, Susan. I do wish the two of you could meet.'

'Where is your granddaughter?' asked Dodo. She sensed a chance to cement a friendship; one that would stand her in good stead when the time came for the Doctor's decision (could she really be so manipulative? When she wanted something this badly, yes).

His gaze was distant, as if looking beyond the heavens. 'She left me, in the end. Or I left her... It was the right decision. She was growing up. She had her young man to take care of her. They all leave me, eventually. It is the curse of the traveller, I'm afraid.'

Dodo began to feel miserable for him, but he shook himself out of his melancholia and beamed at her, laying a fond hand upon hers. 'But listen to me, rattling on about myself and why should you be interested? How about you,

my child? Why is a girl of your age so desperate to leave home, hmm?’

Dodo told him. She told him about the tragedy (but skimmed on the details) and about life in its aftermath. To her own surprise, she tried to explain how trapped she felt. It wasn't that her great-aunt didn't care for her, nor was it that she bore a particular dislike for London. 'It's just,' she said, faltering as she tried to find the right words, 'it's like I've been cheated of my real life, you know? Like I should be somewhere else, doing something better, and instead I'm just going through the motions, trying not to get in the way.'

Dodo fell silent then, and didn't meet the Doctor's eye. She was painfully aware that she had never unburdened herself so thoroughly before. But then, to whom else could she have done so? There was something about the Doctor; something that made her warm to him, despite their short acquaintance. She felt comfortable with him, like she had not done with anyone since... since her father (was that a nice thought or an awful one? Weird, either way). She needed him to like her; to understand. That was why (she realised only now) she had shifted to her Dorothea voice over the course of the day. Creating a good impression, as Aunt Margaret had so often advised her. Still, in that long, pregnant moment, she feared she had said too much; that the Doctor would dismiss her as an emotionally stunted child, too immature, too stupid, to travel with him. She prayed for his approval.

When he didn't speak, impatience forced her to look at him. Her stomach dropped as she saw that he was paying her no heed at all. Her cheeks burnt with shame, though she had thought her face deprived of feeling by the cold. How could she have been so naïve as to think he would be interested in her sorry tale?

She thought he had spaced out again, but he was still alert, straining to hear a conversation a few yards distant: a small group of young men, their faces and bodies animated as they chatted and laughed about something. Their voices were whipped away on the wind, but Dodo heard the word 'church' more than once. The Doctor's eyes were hooded, but they burnt with fierce interest.

The men passed out of Dodo's range of hearing, but the Doctor still stared after them as he struggled to his feet, leaning heavily on his cane. 'I think,' he mumbled, 'I think it is time we moved on.'

Carter had prepared himself for this; had intended to face it with professional detachment. Instead, his brain was arrested by the magnitude of what he was seeing. This... this abomination. His jaw lolled open, and though he tried to close it, his brain's signals no longer appeared to reach his muscles.

The alien corpse lay on the bed like any other patient in sickbay, except that, with its spindly arms and bloated stomach, it resembled a novelty balloon that had been deflated but had air trapped in its centre. Clean white sheets were folded beneath it. The shapes of bones were visible through its papery grey skin. One of Carter's colleagues – Doctor Fry, who had gushed with enthusiasm throughout this ordeal – commented on how it appeared to have human-like ribs. Carter saw only the bulbous grey head and deep, round, black eyes staring out from above two nostril slits and a narrow mouth. His breathing quickened, his surgical mask feeling like a choking gag.

Carter closed his eyes and tried to recite the Lord's Prayer to himself. His concentration was inadequate for even such a practised task. To his dull horror, he couldn't recall the words.

The other scientists were talking, but blood rushing in Carter's ears reduced their voices to a buzz. They must have been affected by this – must have been – but they were setting their minds to the task at hand.

He swallowed hard and lurched forward, taking his place in the ring around the bed. As his panic subsided, he managed to take in some of Professor Whiteside's rambling speculation about the creature's gender. He ought to have contributed, but his stomach was churning. He feared he might vomit at the formaldehyde stench if he opened his mouth.

The surgeon charged with performing the autopsy – a thin-faced, white-haired man; Carter couldn't recall his name at that moment – lifted his hand. Light glinted off something, and Carter was suddenly aware that he was wielding a scalpel.

Of course he was.

'Well, gentlemen? Shall we make a start?'

The surgeon began to make his first, Y-shaped, incision. He cut from the creature's shoulder to the base of its prominent breastbone, then changed direction and struck out

downwards. His knife carved a straight, clean line across the stomach. Green fluid bubbled out with a hiss that might have existed only in Carter's imagination. Whiteside moved in to vacuum the alien blood away.

The creature went into spasm and gave out a pathetic, keening squeal.

Even Fry, and some of the others, recoiled in shock at that. For Carter, it was too much altogether. His legs folded and his eyes slid back into their sockets. As consciousness fled, he felt profoundly grateful to his body for sparing him further torment.

Pain, like hot needles, stabbed into the being's head. He doubled up and lost control of his flight. He fell from the sky, experiencing a second of blackness as he hit something hard and wet. He drifted in water, and realised too late that he couldn't breathe it. His lungs filled. He spluttered to clear them. His chest began to ache hotly, and he didn't know in which direction to head to find safety.

The pain cleared, but the being's thoughts had been shattered.

The psychic scream had been sharper, closer, more urgent – more agonising – than the last. But just as sudden. The being remembered how he had abandoned the girl, Dorothea, knowing only that he was needed elsewhere. And, when his legs had been inadequate to take him to his destination, he had borrowed an idea from those television heroes and had flown instead.

Joseph. That was his name.

His confusion had lessened as he had left the island of Great Britain. With extraneous thoughts no longer tearing him in all directions, he had been free to set about ordering those he had already internalised. To create an identity. It had felt good. He had known a kind of serenity, for the first time in his experience.

He did not want to lose it.

Joseph believed in his own ability to do anything, if he was determined enough. He applied himself to the task of escaping from this deadly liquid. He broke its surface triumphantly emerging like a geyser. He was five miles up before he stopped climbing. The colossal spout of water that had been dragged in his wake lost cohesion and plummeted

away. The slap of its impact churned the ocean into a turbulent mass.

Water still clung to Joseph's clothes. It made him feel uncomfortable. With a thought, he evaporated it. He was in control again.

Then he remembered the urgent call to which he was responding.

In a sober, but stable, frame of mind, the being resumed his errand of mercy.

The rain spared an area of five blocks around the corner on which the church stood. The sky was a threatening blue-grey, but the wind had lessened. People laughed and unbuttoned their coats as they congregated in the litter-strewn back streets.

Dodo couldn't see what had attracted such interest. 'What is it?' she enquired of a young woman in a nurse's uniform. 'What's happening?' The nurse shrugged and moved on.

'Extraordinary,' the Doctor breathed. 'Quite extraordinary. These people have been brought here by nothing more than whispered speculation and impulse. In this weather, too. Human nature never ceases to astonish me. No, never.'

'Well, why did we come here?' asked Dodo.

'That's quite different, quite different indeed. We are here to help.'

'You're pulling my leg, aren't you?'

'From what I have heard, young lady, we may be sorely needed.'

'It's just some big con, though, isn't it? I mean, from what you said on the way here about miracles and faith healers and all that?'

'Perhaps, yes, perhaps. There is only one way to find out. Let us see what is causing all this kerfuffle, shall we?' The Doctor glanced around, then pointed his cane at the church and set off determinedly towards it.

Dodo hesitated for only a second before following him. She could tell that the building was the focal point of the crowd's attention, despite its derelict state. Its brickwork had crumbled and plain wood had replaced stained glass, but its classical design and positioning allowed it to retain a sense of majesty. It seemed to rise above the burnt-out towers around it. But Dodo was more interested in what was inside. It was great, she considered, to be hanging with a guy who was just

as curious as she was, and who had the guts to do something about it – regardless of his age.

A short flight of stone steps led up to the nail-studded wooden door. The Doctor bounded up them with the energy of a teenager, but was brought to a halt as two bulky men came together to bar his way.

‘Now, now, my good fellows,’ he blustered, ‘stand aside if you please. I have business with whoever is inside this church. Urgent business.’

He received no answer.

The Doctor drew himself up to his full height and clutched at his lapels. Dodo was impressed by the change that came over him. He looked like a nobleman. ‘I said I have urgent business, gentlemen,’ he restated imperiously, ‘and I cannot be kept from it.’ He tried to push between the guards, and spluttered in protest as they gripped a shoulder each and propelled him back down onto the street.

‘Hey, leave him alone!’ Dodo protested belatedly, as the Doctor stumbled into her and she caught him.

He produced a white handkerchief from his pocket and mopped at his perspiring brow. ‘No, no, my dear, it is quite all right. I am all right. You mustn’t involve yourself with these... these ruffians.’ He composed himself and smiled at her. ‘It appears we shall have to be patient.’

The tiny chapel had not seen use, Carter guessed, since Marchant had brought this base back into service. Its windows were small, high and dirty. The electric light didn’t work. It made Carter feel that the purpose of the building had become outdated. Kneeling in the gloom, between ranks of wooden chairs that reminded him of classrooms, he could almost feel the ghosts of unanswered prayers in the heavy atmosphere. He had only one question today. It was a simple one. He mouthed it over and over, but it was swallowed up by silence.

‘Why?’

The sound of a latch behind him made him leap to his feet. He knocked his knee against a chair back as he scrambled into the aisle. His nerves were taut with anxiety. Embarrassed by his overreaction, he turned to see General Marchant silhouetted in the doorway. ‘Your presence is required, Professor Carter,’ rapped the soldier.

‘I... don’t think I can,’ said Carter feebly.

Marchant strode towards him and came to a smart halt, the peak of his cap level with Carter's nose and only inches away. Somehow, Carter still had the impression that the man was glowering down at him.

'Oh no you don't, mister. I can replace you, but not without compromising the security of this project. I am not prepared to do that, and I don't think you want to spend the next month or two in the guardhouse, do you?'

Carter just gaped, and knew that, in so doing, he had betrayed his weakness.

'Because I will order you confined, mister, make no mistake about it. You aren't leaving this base with the information you have, not until Project Bluebird is concluded, maybe not even then. Now, are you ready to serve your country or not?'

Carter was beaten. He knew that, but he still could not force his legs to move. 'What about the creature?' he asked hoarsely.

'Dead,' said Marchant, without any indication that he cared in the slightest. 'Confirmed, this time. It can't hurt you now, Professor.'

Time stood still for Alexander Lullington-Smythe as he stood on the top step of the church and faced his audience. They were a motley bunch: dropouts, mostly, or jaded city dwellers lulled into SoHo by the promise of salvation. A need to believe. There would be more of them soon. Many more, and from more important walks of life.

Their faces were blurred – he didn't like to wear his glasses in public – but he knew he had their full attention as he introduced himself and ran through a brief resume of his career to date. Just for the record. He had no doubt that a few reporters would be present.

It was odd, but Smythe was usually more nervous in this type of situation. He had encountered too many jeering audiences to take one for granted. And yet, this time, he knew there was no risk. He knew for certain what their reaction would be.

Alexander Lullington-Smythe was about to become rich and famous.

'I want to assure you,' he said, projecting his voice to be heard; emphasising each word to give his pronouncement the portentous quality it deserved, 'that the rumours you have

heard are all true. Remarkable beings walk amongst us, and they have come to help.' There had been more, much more, but Smythe had forgotten large portions of his carefully crafted speech. He cut awkwardly to the point.

'No, not just beings. I am here to tell you that the Gods of Myth have returned.'

He paused, and savoured the incredulous gasp that ensued. The crowd were amazed, delighted, overawed. Most importantly, they believed.

Reporters began to call for photographers and TV crews.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' continued Smythe, relishing his moment, 'welcome to the Church of the Latter-Day Pantheon. The gods will address you all shortly.'

Chapter Four

BEYOND BELIEF by Timothy Hudson [extract]

In the case of the New York incident, it is significant that initial manifestations occurred in an area of deprivation. We have discussed the Marxist view that those who feel disenfranchised by low societal status are more likely to seek escape in the transcendental sphere. To many, these self-proclaimed gods provided a more alluring escape route than did the dogmatic structure of the church. Assisted by the slick marketing of Alexander Lullington-Smythe and by the hysterical reaction of the media – their authoritative voice lending credence to the incredible – these gods appealed to every animistic need within us, even facilitating regression to polytheistic beliefs by the provision of a patriarchal leader.

In a city torn apart by crime, poverty and discrimination, whose leaders were orchestrating a distant and unpopular war, the arrival of apparently independent arbiter/protector figures fulfilled many powerful needs. People wanted to believe, and were thus manipulated by Lullington-Smythe and his cohorts into perceiving and reporting the impossible.

About Faith: Sociological & Psychological Aspects of Religion
edited by E. Coren, pub. Crosswell Educational Books, 1980

An elderly man sat on a flattened-out cardboard box in a shop doorway outside the Port Authority bus terminal. He extended a battered mug in which lonely coins rattled. Steven Taylor carried on by, with a guilty, helpless shrug. He wanted to help, but he had no money, and this man was only the latest. He had stopped to talk to the first, but had been rebuffed when it became clear that he could offer only friendship and advice. Steven had smelt alcohol on the man's breath, and had known that a few cents would not have helped anyway.

Too many miserable people. Too few solutions. Had Steven been rich in the currency of this land and time, he

would still have been unable to do more than scratch the surface of its problems. So what was the point in trying?

At least here, in Midtown, lights still shone. Between the dark and dangerous streets, the avenues were alight and vibrant. Though the threat of evening loomed, summoned early by ponderous clouds, neither crowds nor traffic showed signs of easing. Clumsy cars with angular shapes rolled by on wheels. Confined to the ground, it was a wonder they weren't completely gridlocked. Steven had become accustomed to their angry horn chorus. The Empire State Building rose into the clouds, a few blocks distant, its tapered end shrouded in mist. He remembered standing on its observation deck, in what seemed like another lifetime.

He had returned to the TARDIS twice, knocking impatiently upon its door; receiving no response. Why hadn't he insisted on having a key? He was cold, tired and hungry, and he wanted to forget that this city existed; that human beings could live in such squalor.

Only it wasn't just here. It wasn't just now.

The Daleks had destroyed New York in the mid twenty-second century. Before Steven's time. But he had seen their legacy. He had looked out over the city from the top of what had become, once again, its tallest building. He had seen the rubble, the wastelands, that hid behind the gleaming new façade. He had walked its streets, then as now, and had seen the suffering of those who had lost everything; whom rebuilding had left behind.

Nothing changed.

He had resolved to fight it. He had been an able-bodied, capable young man – still was – so why couldn't he join up? Go out onto the frontier? Stop the aggressors before they reached their target, this time? Before they did their damage? It had almost worked too.

He had felt like a hero – felt useful, at least – manning the helm of a streamlined Terran battleship built from modified Dalek designs. Earth had become embroiled in conflict after petty conflict, against rebellious colonies, war-hungry monsters or simply other proud people. So Steven Taylor had done all he could to save his world. He had gone to war.

War. At the time, it had seemed a good thing. A necessary thing. A means of protecting freedom. Now, the word itself appeared twisted and ugly, as it screamed out from the sandwich boards of news vendors. Rain dampened the ink

and made it run like black blood. The TARDIS had brought Steven to the time of one of the most protracted and pointless conflicts his race had known. The war in Vietnam. He could have told them; could have impressed his knowledge of future history upon the warmongers and made them realise the futility of their actions. But, he supposed, they already knew.

Who needed Daleks? Mankind was quite capable of fuelling its own misery.

He remembered shore leave on the colony world of Roylus Prime, after the uprising there had been quelled. There had been people in the streets then too, many more than here, with ragged clothes and broken limbs and stomachs beginning to distend from hunger. He had seen one wretch clubbed three times with the butt of a standard issue laser rifle, for the crime of not moving fast enough when told to vacate the street. She had suffered a fractured skull, and Steven had been sickened, thinking in that second of every pilot whose evasive manoeuvres he had matched, every ship on to which he had enabled weapons operators to lock sensors. These weren't Daleks. They weren't Cybermen. They were poor, desperate people. He had been fighting on the wrong side.

Steven still regretted that he had not intervened earlier; hadn't challenged the cruel soldier and spared the woman her pain and humiliation and eventual death. He had been too shocked and appalled to move. It had happened too quickly. With hindsight, his excuse seemed pitiful.

Sometimes, he could hear the horrible crunch of metal against bone. The ghost of the dead woman stalked his dreams and asked him why he had done nothing.

And yet, what was the point in acting, when he had seen the future, and it was no better than this? When the problems of 1965 went far beyond the ability of one man to solve? When he had left Anne Chaplet to a brutal, lingering death in Revolutionary France?

Anne Chaplet. That still hurt too. The Doctor had taken Steven to the eve of the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre. They had left a friend behind there. To suffer, perhaps to die. To take her place in history. The Doctor had insisted that they could not interfere. They could only allow Anne's life to play out as time decreed. How could he have been so callous?

At least the old man felt bad about what he had done. Steven believed that, in part at least, the Doctor's near-obsession with the Dorothea girl was motivated by the revelation of her surname, Chaplet, and the irrational belief that her existence somehow redeemed him; proved that Anne had bucked the odds and survived to continue her family line after all.

It wasn't enough.

On the blood-stained streets of Roylus Prime, Steven had vowed not to let anyone else suffer if he could help it. Despite strong, off-the-record advice from superiors, he had doggedly pursued a case against the soldier whose despicable act he had witnessed. He had shouted loud enough to be heard; to have disciplinary action taken. Loud enough, too, to know that he had thrown away his chances of promotion, and to find himself reassigned to a one-man fighter running politically safe non-combat missions in ever more dangerous zones. He had lost the trust of his comrades. His one friend during that long period was a stuffed panda bear called Hi-Fi. Worst of all, he knew that his contributions to the cause of peace had been – and would continue to be – insignificant.

When, at last, he had crashed in flames on the planet Mechanus, nobody had even come to look for him. He doubted that anyone cared. The eventual arrival of the Doctor, with his zeal for justice and his astonishing time/space machine, had given him another chance; fired him up with the belief that he could still make a difference. Until now.

This morning, Steven had walked out of the TARDIS for ever, almost crying with the frustration of having been proved helpless again. He had returned, only because the thought of life in this primitive century had been a frightening prospect. But it was time to leave. He could not go on like this.

He needed a home. Somewhere to settle. Not his own world, not his present. Not the past. Somewhere better. Somewhere that might need him. A place where he might be able to help, on a small scale at least. Do his bit, and just forget about the things he was unable to improve. He wondered, unhappily, how long it might take him to catch such a dream.

Having wandered as far north as Central Park, Steven was lured into its environs by the heady scent of new, wet leaves. The complex shapes and colours of nature were a beautiful

contrast to the stark, grey lines of the skyscrapers that rose above them. He thought he could take refuge here. Walk, alone in the last of the fading light, and remind himself that good places, good times, existed too.

The sound of a gunshot disabused him of such a comforting notion. It came from too far away for him to pinpoint its direction; to reach it, even if he could, in time to help. He resigned himself to being useless, asking himself again: What would be the point?

A renewed blast of wind whipped hailstones into his face and stung his ears. Steven plunged his hands into the pocket of his long fawn raincoat, lowered his eyes to the ground and trudged disconsolately onward. The sound of police sirens merged with the blaring of horns and the whining of the uncaring elements.

General Charles Marchant was cold, but he possessed too much self-discipline to indulge himself in a shiver, even with nobody else present. Mustn't let the side down. He stood in the main hangar of Rogers Air Force Base: once a metallic cavern of echoes and directionless sounds, now filled almost to capacity by a single object. His gaze flicked between the double doors, which remained steadfastly closed, and the artefact.

The artefact. Why not call it what it was? The spaceship. The alien spaceship.

Though disfigured and scorch-marked, it was somehow impressive. It resembled a giant egg, but it was a pasty shade of grey. Closer inspection of its surface revealed a billion interwoven strands, each barely the width of a hair. A hole in the construct's side betrayed a cutaway scene of haphazard chambers, delineated by curved partitions of the same material. The partitions seemed to grow out of the exterior wall.

Marchant had already had technicians examine the ship. They had found no possible way that it could function. No engines, no controls, no navigational equipment, nothing. Their only recommendation had been to bring in refrigeration units: huge panels pumping out chilled air, which was why Marchant felt so blasted cold. But there had been no choice. The ship, apparently, was every bit as organic as it seemed. And it was dead. Beginning to decay. Parts of its surface had drizzled into rancid, green-tinged pools, caught in a state just

short of liquid by the lowering of the temperature. If this marvellous find wasn't to rot away before Marchant's eyes, it had to be kept on ice.

The general's team of boffins hadn't seen the ship yet. Its erstwhile occupant had demanded more urgent attention. Still, he hoped to learn its secrets eventually. That was why he had drafted in the Carter fellow at the last moment. He was a biophysicist, and, little as Marchant knew about such matters, he suspected that that strange, hybrid discipline might prove to be the one to unlock the secrets of this strange, hybrid craft. So long as Carter got over his current attack of nerves, blast the man.

Nerves. It had been said of Charles Marchant, by more than one man under his command, that he would never admit to having such a weakness. But, as he stood in that hangar and stared up at a thing from beyond his world, he could feel his nerves stretch so tight that a careless move could have snapped them. He did not betray his tension, of course.

Marchant's whole career had been building to this. He had been attached to Project Blue Book for eight years now, initially greeting the assignment with scepticism and well-hidden resentment. He had discarded blurred and obviously faked photographs of so-called saucers; dismissed accounts of lonely men molested on country roads. But then he had found more credible evidence – metal monsters at Shoreditch in London, strange goings-on at Corman in Nevada – and had begun to realise how vital his new job was.

He had prepared himself for this day. He had not expected it to be like this.

The aliens were here. They had landed, and Charles Marchant, in whose hands lay the fate of a world, had been unable to stop them. He didn't know where they were. They could be making plans for war, and he could not even locate them, far less mount a defence.

He had men out searching, of course. Manhattan teemed with undercover soldiers, briefed with a selective version of the truth. For many hours over the past days, the general had paced the radio room, fingernails biting more deeply into his palms as only rumblings about lunatic cultists filtered back to him. He had sat in his office, applying himself to the task of filling out forms and fending off calls from the Pentagon. Only once had a radio operator deemed something important enough to call him on his private line. The sound of her voice

had stopped his breath: an omen that his fate was about to be decided. He had felt an unreasoning anger upon learning that the wretched woman had simply been contacted by a journalist.

'But, sir,' she had protested, stinging from his rebuff, 'she claims to be your daughter.'

'I don't have a daughter,' Marchant had lied with practised ease, and had wondered how she could have found him

He stood in the silence of the hangar, lost for something to keep his mind occupied. He had made sure that the girls in the radio room knew where he was. He had ordered that word be sent to him as soon as any substantial report came in. His gaze kept flicking to the double doors, but still no messenger arrived.

General Charles Marchant had a recurring nightmare. It sometimes caused him to wake, in the middle of the night, sweating and trembling. It made him pour himself copious quantities of fine brandy, bolstering his reserves as he tried to deny that, even in sleep, he could have entertained such thoughts.

He dreamt that he had failed in his appointed task. That the aliens had taken over the planet Earth, and it was all his fault.

Steven didn't see the attack coming.

His only warning was a rustle in the bushes, the scraping of feet against gravel, and then something barrelled into his left side and propelled him to the ground. He hit hard, and a sharp pain sliced into his right hip. Somebody was on top of him, a wiry, dirty; heavy-breathing somebody – with friends. Steven cursed himself for his introspection. He had seen the results of crime all around the city, but had not treated it as dangerous. Not to him. Not to the man who had battled Daleks and Mechanoids and alien schemers with incredible technology. He felt humiliated to have been so easily surprised. But his lapse had passed now. They would not get the better of him.

'We want your money, pal!' the dirty youth hissed through broken teeth. Steven felt breath on his cheek, and the blade of a knife was pressed against his throat. He pushed upward, gambling that his attacker would expect him to be frozen with fear. The youth was caught off-guard. His arms flailed into the air, and the immediate threat of the knife was removed.

Steven seized the front of the white T-shirt beneath the youth's leather jacket, and rolled him heavily onto his back. He didn't have time to make sure he stayed down. There were three others, by his quick reckoning. He was still only halfway to standing when the next two rushed him. He surrendered three paces, but kept himself upright. He felt rough bark against his back as he hit a tree. He steadied himself against it, and lashed out.

A good punch caught one of the thugs on the jaw. He crumpled, and the other swore and punched Steven in the stomach. Steven doubled up, unable to stop himself, and his chin fell into a fist. The world performed a dizzying spin, and then he was pinned up against the tree as grubby hands rifled through his pockets, reaching, reaching, grasping, despite his efforts to tear them away.

'He ain't got nothin'!' one of the thugs exclaimed in disappointment.

The first one – the armed one – was back up now, his face twisted by rage, as if it was he who had been wronged. 'Waste our time, would ya?' He made a clumsy thrust with his knife, and Steven squirmed out of its way. He pushed one of his attackers into the first, but, wherever he turned, there were more hands and more fists. He made a desperate break, but a foot tripped him and, as he rolled onto his back, the boy with the knife was there and Steven felt a hammer-blow pain in his guts.

The youth's expression softened as he and Steven locked stares. There was no anger there, and no triumph. The mugger was calm and sober, as if he had just completed a necessary act. And Steven, in turn, was filled with horrified disbelief as he realised that his life was flowing out of a ragged, burning puncture, and that, after all his struggles, he had been killed by these most mundane of adversaries in a senseless, random act of violence.

He wondered if the Doctor would ever find out what had happened to him. He might wait by the TARDIS for hours, days, before concluding that Steven had meant what he had said and was not coming back. He might leave, with a heavy heart, and never know the truth.

'Desist from this chaotic act.'

It didn't sound like a command; more a polite suggestion. Steven thought, at first, that he might have begun to hallucinate. The four youths turned from him, alarmed as he

was surprised by this unheralded arrival. The one with the knife – the killer, Steven’s killer – stepped automatically to their fore, and a feral smile spread across his face at the realisation that this new challenger, like the last, was alone.

The man seemed not at all concerned about being so badly outnumbered. He was slight of stature, but his pose suggested nonchalance. His hands were buried in the pockets of a light, red summer jacket. The weather seemed not to affect him, except that the wind ruffled his buoyant, blond hair. His face was plain, but there was something strange about it. Steven could not think what. That confusion, above all else, nagged at him. His mind was losing its lucidity. The events of a few feet away seemed increasingly to be taking place at a vast, impossible distance. He could not reach the scene in time to help. Again. He was dying as he had lived.

‘And what’re you gonna do about it, eh?’ Unpleasant laughs all round, at that. Laughs of confidence.

‘I am going to restore order.’

The man sounded as if he meant it. The muggers looked at each other, nonplussed. Steven read the bewilderment in their faces. They didn’t know what to make of this brave or stupid newcomer. It seemed too much for their nominal leader. His expression twisted again, as he perceived another challenge and raised his knife to meet it. He lunged forward.

The newcomer waved a casual hand.

The youth exploded into flames.

Or did he? Steven’s eyes closed then, as if heavy weights were attached to their lids. He knew they would not open again. In his fading thoughts was an image of his killer, twisting in silent pain as a corona of yellow fire clung impossibly to him. His skin blackened and flaked into ashes until only a skeletal black outline stood, suspended for an infinite second, before it too fell to the ground and crumbled. Steven thought he heard the remaining thugs swearing and screaming and crying; panicked footsteps as they fled. But then he was dying, and the world had taken on the ethereal quality of dreams, so Steven no longer knew what was real and what fevered hallucination.

A hand took his, and he was lifted to his feet. He swayed uncertainly, not sure if his legs would support him. He opened his eyes, and half-expected to greet an afterlife of

some description. Instead, he found himself still in Central Park. The muggers were nowhere to be seen. The man in the red jacket was standing before him, a half-smile on his face.

It occurred to Steven to inspect his stomach. There was no cut, no blood. No sign that he had been wounded. Had he imagined that too?

‘Wh-what...?’ he stammered, but his mouth was dry and no further words would emerge. He looked at his apparent rescuer helplessly, and saw then what his mind had been too numb to register before. The man’s skin was totally smooth. His nose was a near-perfect triangle. His eyes were evenly spaced. Even his hair looked as if it had been painted on, not a strand out of place. His face – his whole body, Steven realised – was impossibly symmetrical. As if he had been made, not born. The effect was surprisingly unnerving.

By the time Steven had found his voice, the most urgent question in his thoughts had changed. ‘Who are you?’

The man extended a hand. ‘I am Norman,’ he said. ‘The God of Order.’

Private Stanley Emerson could hardly believe what he had seen. He had laughed about this assignment, along with his buddies, for each morning of the past week, as they had ridden a regulation green coach from Rogers Air Force Base into the city. A lightweight assignment, they had said. Just keep your eyes peeled for anything unusual. General Marchant’s briefmg had not been much more specific. He had said something about top secret research; had hinted that something had landed in Manhattan that should not have done. There had been enough rumours about UFOs, though. Enough jokes about green men from Mars. Stan had thought this a make-work mission; something to keep them occupied. Well, if the powers-that-be wanted him to mooch around the Midtown shops and delis, then who was he to argue? Except that, after seven frozen, footsore days, he had become weary of inactivity and had started to yearn for the companionship of the barracks back home.

Now, everything had changed.

He had been drawn into Central Park by idle, fanciful notions of crashed spaceships. He had heard the grunts and cries of combat, and had rushed to see what was happening. He had been too late to save a young, athletic man – only a few years older than himself, he had noted with a shudder –

from being stabbed by a gang of thugs. Safely concealed, Stan had fingered his radio, wondering whether it was appropriate to call for back-up, or just to inform the police. He had been in this job for such a short time.

And then, he had seen what he had been searching for, without knowing it, for seven long days. Something very unusual indeed.

'God of Order?' repeated Steven. 'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Your fear called out to me. You were in need of assistance.'

Steven remembered his attacker, writhing in flames. The phantom taste of smoke stung his throat. 'What are you, some kind of pyrokinetic? You killed that boy, didn't you?'

'My actions were necessary for the maintenance of order.'

'Order?' Steven snorted derisively. The word conjured up images of Roylus Prime, where the restoration of order had meant prison camps and death squads. He hadn't seen it before, but Norman's jacket looked like the old-fashioned red coat of a bygone military force. His perfect face betrayed a steely resolve; a determination that his will would triumph. This man cared nothing for life. Not if it got in his way. 'There's nothing ordered about killing. You could have stopped those thugs some other way. You didn't have to go that far!'

'You wished for the removal of his kind, and for the preservation of your life.'

'I didn't want him dead!' contested Steven hotly.

Norman frowned. 'Yes, you did.'

'Who are you to tell me what I was thinking?' Steven shouted. An instant later, an answer occurred to him. Could Norman be telepathic as well? Such mutations weren't unheard of amongst his kind, though he had thought them rare at this point in time. And had Steven harboured murderous thoughts about his attacker? Perhaps so. Perhaps, in that cold instant when he had first realised what the boy had done to him. Perhaps he had wished for their roles to be reversed. Perhaps, given the chance, he would have taken a life to save his own.

Belatedly, as always, he remembered Norman's apparent power. He lived only through this strange man's whim. The wrong word, the wrong action, and he too could perish in

flames. Or Norman might reopen his knife wound. It wasn't wise, thought Steven, to be shouting and accusing like this. His bull-headed approach might have proved fatal. Still, he could not stand silent whilst an injustice was done. Not again.

'All the same,' he said sullenly, 'it didn't give you the right to kill him.'

Norman nodded thoughtfully. 'It is wrong to take a life – and yet, I exchanged your life for his. I maintained the balance. Is that not right?'

'Well, I'm grateful to you for saving me, of course I am,' said Steven, feeling a little flustered. Norman spoke like a child. He seemed genuinely concerned, albeit in a detached way, about what he had done. It was not what Steven had expected.

'But you believe there was a more ordered manner in which I could have accomplished your objective,' the stranger concluded. 'You believe that both lives could have been preserved.' He smiled again, and nodded curtly. 'I have much to learn, I see.'

He had left the path and disappeared through the bushes before Steven had time to register that he had even turned away. How could he just walk off like this? 'Hey, hold on!' Steven protested, bursting through the undergrowth after him. 'Where are you going?'

He caught sight of Norman again, striding briskly across a grass field towards the nearest low boundary wall. If he had heard Steven's calls, he ignored them.

What was he, anyway? A naïve man blessed with incredible abilities? An alien? A villain, concealing his motives beneath a baffling exterior? He had introduced himself as 'the God of Order'. What had he meant by that?

Whatever the case, this Norman could be dangerous. He didn't seem mature enough to cope with his powers. And Steven had once made a vow about never turning his back.

He set off at a trot, determined to keep Norman in view, to see where he went and what he did next. It would be some time before he recalled his earlier maudlin introspection. Thoughts of his futile life and of the pain that his own race could inflict had been pushed firmly into the back of his mind by a much greater imperative.

Steven felt he was needed.

A minute earlier, Stan had felt like a B-movie spy. He had applied his training successfully, shadowing his quarry as he strolled casually downtown; avoiding detection by the muggers' victim who, for whatever reason, was trailing his saviour too. He had almost forgotten the powers that he had seen this man wield; had dreamt, instead, of General Marchant's approval and the commendation that would no doubt go on his file. He had thought about how pleased his grandmother would be. Stan had sensed an end to his quest as Norman – if that was his name; he had caught only snatches of the conversation in Central Park – had turned into the gloomy streets of the Bowery, and then SoHo.

But his task was not so easy here, where fewer people dared walk. Norman paused, his face washed blue by the faded neon light of a cheap saloon. And, just for a second, he turned, and seemed to look directly at Stanley Emerson. And changed.

It was in that second that Stan's life was forever altered; that his make-work mission turned into a matter of international security, and a spectral hand took hold of his world-view and twisted it by forty-five degrees. Stan's all-too-recent training was undone, and he could do nothing but gape as Norman turned a corner and escaped from his surveillance.

He was jerked out of his stupor by the soft sound of footsteps, and the realisation that somebody was behind him.

He stifled a yelp as he span around, a hand reaching for his concealed revolver. The other man from the park was there. He had reacted to Stan's sudden movement by dropping into an alert stance, watching keenly. A fighter, Stan thought. And no doubt he had registered Stan's moment of fright.

'What are you doing here?' he demanded, trying to keep a squeak out of his voice.

'I could ask you the same question.'

'US Army, pal. I've got business here. Now why don't you get going, before I have to take you in?' The tough words were belied by Stan's reedy voice. He was painfully aware that, with his puny frame, ginger hair and freckled skin, he did not cut an imposing figure. The other man was older and taller than him, and far more muscular. His shoulders were broader. Stan didn't even have a uniform to lend him authority.

Certainly, his threat did not have the desired effect. The man stepped forward, with a smile and an extended hand. 'I think we're investigating the same person. My name's Steven Taylor. Perhaps we can work together?'

'Didn't you hear me?' cried Stan, wishing he didn't sound quite so much like a petulant infant. 'I said to get out of here!'

'But that's ridiculous,' protested Taylor. 'We can help each other.'

Stan drew his revolver. Even as he stood with it, shaking in his unsteady grip, he didn't know why. He was overreacting. But, after what he had seen, who could blame him? Who knew that this Steven Taylor wasn't another of them? 'P-please,' he stammered plaintively, 'just leave.'

Taylor regarded him levelly for a moment, then sighed and shrugged his shoulders. 'If that's the way you want it, fine,' he said, 'but I think you're making a mistake.'

He turned and walked away, showing no fear of the fact that a gun was trained on his back. Alone again, Stan realised that he was sweating. He glanced around and hid the revolver, worried that somebody might have witnessed his foolishness.

Then his thoughts returned to his mission, and he felt cold as he realised what a moment of panic had cost him. Cursing under his breath, he ran across the road and around the corner. Far too late. He would have to report that he had found his target and lost him. He was tempted not to call in at all, rather than face the general's inevitable wrath. But what he had seen was too important.

Stan thought fast. He could blame an interfering civilian for his error. He could intimate that Norman had eluded him through extraterrestrial trickery. And he could point out that he had been heading towards the church; the one from which such fantastic rumours had been emanating. Wasn't that coincidence too great to be believed? Wasn't it likely that Norman was in the church right now? That Stan had seen all he needed to see after all?

He lifted his radio to his mouth, but hesitated at the thought of putting his most important find into words. As if doing so would make it irrevocably real.

He remembered Norman, standing in blue light. He would never forget how his face had blurred and shifted, until it became a mass of green fronds around three malevolent scarlet eyes. How the creature, once revealed, had simply

turned away, as if it didn't matter that Norman had glimpsed its true nature. As if he couldn't affect its plans anyway.

Private Stanley Emerson had discovered the truth. He had seen the enemy. He knew now that alien beings had infiltrated his world.

He just didn't know what to do about it yet.

Chapter Five

THE ALIENS HAVE LANDED!

They're here, and it's OFFICIAL! Aliens have come from OUTER SPACE, and they've landed in NEW YORK!

Police switchboards were JAMMED last Friday night (19 March) by callers who plainly saw a SPACESHIP above Manhattan!

It was a giant green SAUCER, with tiny portholes around it. And, as it came in for a landing downtown, it gave off a sinister GREEN GLOW!

Since then, there have been ALIEN SIGHTINGS all across the city.

Miss Adrienne Ford of Long Island said: 'It was TERRIBLE! I went into the laundry room, and my NEIGHBOR, Mr Esterhaus, was there. His skin was GREEN and he had six TENTACLES! Of course, when he saw me, he became HUMAN again.

'I've always SUSPECTED he was from outer space, and now it's been proved!'

The police were ordered to deny EVERYTHING, but one senior officer told us: 'I'm sick of these LIES! Something DID come down in Manhattan that night!

'I wouldn't be surprised if ALIEN KILLERS weren't making their plans right now Why else would they be biding? They obviously want to CONQUER OUR WORLD!

'My advice to the public is to STAY INDOORS!'

If YOU see ALIENS FROM OUTER SPACE, call our news desk and LET US KNOW. There could be a REWARD of up to \$50!

The National Scandal, w/e April 3, 1965

Dodo sat cross-legged in the middle of the street, remembering how tired she was and how long it had been since she had last bathed and changed or even eaten properly. It seemed her dreams were beginning to break already, shifting into a listless boredom. The crowd outside the church had grown, and had settled in for a long wait. TV

cameras had been set up, their presence providing an additional lure to the curious. A couple of policemen had made attempts to disperse the gathering, or at least to shift it onto the pavements (no, *sidewalks*), but nobody had been willing to move. In the end, it had proved easier to divert what little traffic strayed into this depressed area. Nothing else had happened for almost two hours now, and Dodo was restless.

She wondered what the Doctor's plans were for tonight. Would he book them into a hotel? He was leaving it a bit late, if so. She didn't like to ask him, in case he decided it was time to leave. Right now, he was one of the few people still standing. He seemed indefatigable, apart from a slight lean on his walking cane. Despite the elapsed time, he was still alert and interested. His attention was focused upon the church door.

Dodo had expressed her boredom twice now. Each time, his answer had simply been a mumbled: 'Patience, my dear girl, patience.'

At seven o'clock, the door opened.

Kathy Marchant leaned against the crumbling wall of a rundown tenement, ignoring her photographer as she glared resentfully at the church across the street. She took another drag of her cigarette, but even its warmth in her chest could not combat the cold outside. She hated her editor for sending her out to cover what could only be a monumental hoax. Today of all days. In this weather. When she had more urgent leads to pursue.

She had not been allowed to argue, of course. Bushkin often referred, in jest, to Kathy's 'UFO fixation'. He allowed her to work on it, but only in her spare time. He trimmed and buried her articles, when he ran them at all. She couldn't explain why the subject was such an important one to her. She couldn't tell anybody that.

The shutterbug – a bright young spark, too bright, called Lance – was gushing on about this being his first big assignment. 'Tell you what, kid,' Kathy grumbled, 'you handle it yourself if you're so keen. I'll go home to a nice hot meal and you can tell me about it tomorrow.'

'Aren't you excited?' whined Lance, seeming hurt by her cynicism.

'About a bunch of religious fruitcakes? No!'

'You did the story about the blind man who was cured, didn't you? I saw the original draft of that. I thought it was a shame they cut it. All the evidence you had...'

'Yeah, well – Bushkin's not interested in evidence, just sensationalism. He'd turn the *Ranger* into the *National Scandal* if the publishers'd let him. He knows Lullington-Smythe's a con-man – everyone knows that – but the jerk puts on the right show and Bushkin'll give him all the column inches he wants, never mind what's really happening out there!'

'You think there are actually aliens?'

'I think the government believes there are,' said Kathy guardedly.

'Today's *Scandal* said –'

'It printed crap, like it usually does!'

'But,' Lance persisted, 'what if this Lullingfield-whatever-his-name-is character has found something this time? What if he does represent these aliens or faith healers or whatever?'

'Then it'll be the first time that little slug's said an honest word in his life!' said Kathy, determined not to show that Lance had voiced her fondest desire. If it hadn't been such a hopeless one, then she might have been more patient and less bitter.

Her cigarette had burnt down to a stub, but it had given her no comfort anyway. She tossed it aside and, by habit more than desire, rummaged through her coat for another.

'Hey!' cried Lance, and Kathy's immediate reaction was to roll her eyes. Had he not got the message about leaving her alone yet?

Then she realised what had precipitated this latest interruption.

'Something's happening!'

Alexander Lullington-Smythe emerged onto the church steps again, unable to suppress a broad smile when, this time, he was greeted by multiple flashbulb bursts. His audience leapt to its feet as one, as if jolted by an electric current. People jostled for the best view. A murmur of excited anticipation rose. Smythe quelled it with a small wave of his hand. He enjoyed wielding such intoxicating power.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' he intoned, 'and members of the press – I am sorry to have kept you all waiting, but –'

'Can't hear you!' someone piped up from the back, ruining Smythe's moment.

He cleared his throat awkwardly, and raised his voice. He had tried to obtain a microphone, but the bureaucratic microbes at all the rental places he knew had held past misfortunes against him. 'I am sorry to have kept you waiting,' he repeated, 'but the gods have had some business to attend to.' They had indeed: Smythe's business. Each detail of their forthcoming show had been meticulously planned and rehearsed. This would be the gig of Smythe's life. He was glad that he had had his telephone reconnected only three days earlier. He would need it after today. Hell, with the money he was about to make, he could afford another.

'Let me start by thanking you all for your interest in this auspicious occasion. I am personally very excited that –'

He was interrupted again, this time by a ragged cheer, which turned into enthusiastic applause. He turned, and was disgruntled to see that his clients had put in an appearance ahead of their cue. 'What are you doing?' he hissed to Max.

'Our subjects did not wish to wait.'

The five beings formed a row at the front of the topmost step. A couple of people surged forward, wanting to touch them, but the bouncers to whom Smythe had earlier promised five bucks apiece held them back. The dim, sputtering streetlight on the corner chose that moment to burst into renewed life. Smythe felt like he was under a spotlight.

He stepped aside and grinned at his audience, hoping to give the impression that all was going to plan. 'Aha, er, let me introduce, ladies and gentlemen, the Latter-Day Pantheon.'

Dodo didn't see what the fuss was about. She was relieved that something was happening, at last, but disappointed too. The people on the steps didn't seem too special to her.

Each took a bow in turn as their manager (or whoever he was: the spindly bloke with the squint and the fifties grey suit that was a size too small for him) reeled off their names.

Dodo didn't much care for Max, the so-called God of Materialism. With his dark glasses, fashionable smart clothes and cocky grin, he seemed to represent all that she disliked about the capitalist system. God of Greed would have been a better title, she considered. Nor did she like Dennis, who was

apparently the God of War (whoever heard of gods called Dennis?). He wore the pristine uniform of an officer in the US Army, and had the stern, impassive features of one who sent soldiers into battle without caring a jot for each individual life. The brim of his cap was pulled down low so Dodo couldn't see his eyes. The effect was to neuter any trace of humanity that she might have seen in him. He was a cruel, faceless killer.

She was more kindly disposed towards Norman, the God of Order. He was a presentable young man in neat attire. Nor did he seem to be the stern authoritarian figure that his title might have suggested. He was not one to stop people from having fun; not like Dodo's Aunt Margaret. He was here to ensure that all things proceeded as they should. To hold back chaos. He wouldn't have let the tragedy occur. He would have saved Dodo's parents.

And then there was Jennifer, the Goddess of Free Love, and she was beautiful. Not just on the outside, with her flowing blonde locks and the olive skin that seemed to glint in the artificial lighting, but inside too. Dodo sensed that she was a free spirit, an untamed adventurer. She felt that Jennifer's was a kindred soul. She associated her with an image of waterfalls, and of mist rising from a blue mountain pool.

The leader of the gods was introduced as the Patriarch. He stood a head taller than his colleagues, and his hair and beard were golden and flowing. His fine, gilt-edged robes accentuated his regal bearing, although he wore no other obvious signifier of his elevated position. No crown or anything. To Dodo, he seemed all-knowing, wise and fair. Even the Gods of Materialism and War seemed less repugnant to her now, as she realised that they were merely a necessary part of the Patriarch's family. They had their individual domains to oversee, but the Patriarch was ever at their shoulder, providing a check.

Dodo blinked, and realised that she had begun to accept the claims of these people without question. She wasn't the only one. The crowd was enraptured. As the Patriarch spoke, in rich and sonorous tones, nobody else dared mutter or cough or even breathe too hard. Even the cameras of the newspapers had been stilled.

'Know that we are here to help. It has been many years since last we walked this Earth, but now we find it steeped in

misery. You, our people, have called to us in your need, and we have answered that call.'

Utter silence greeted his speech, for several seconds. Then, somewhat hesitantly, the manager of the gods stepped forward and began to clap, alone at first. The applause soon spread. Dodo felt like joining in, but lowered her hands as the Doctor turned to her. His expression was grave, but cheers had been struck up now and it would have been pointless to attempt to speak to him over the noise. She contented herself with watching the rest of the crowd instead. It was as if they had been gripped by hysteria. Some of them wept, whilst others fell to their knees and prayed to their new gods. Some were more reserved, and merely clapped politely. But most of them believed.

A full three minutes passed (to Dodo, it seemed that the tumult would never end) before the gods' manager (Lumley-Smith?) could be heard again. He seemed more self-assured than before, and he could not keep a lunatic grin off his face. 'My friends, as I am sure you can appreciate, the gods have much to do. Their work on our plane is only just beginning, and most of it will be on a grander scale than we can imagine. However, they have graciously agreed to prove their intentions to us on a personal level. They will allow five of you to speak with them. No more, for the present.'

There was already a discernible movement towards the church, and the speaker raised his hands to stave off the tide. 'Please do not take this opportunity lightly. Only volunteer yourself if you have an urgent reason for wanting to commune with the gods – if you are sure that they can help you – and if you are prepared to be interviewed about what you have seen later. We need to spread the word. Yes, you, madam – and you, sir.'

'What do you think's going on?' asked Dodo, then turned to find that the Doctor was no longer by her side. A moment later, she saw why. Her heart leapt at the sight of the old man climbing the church steps and taking his place amongst the chosen few. How had he managed to wangle that? More importantly, how come he had left her behind?

Dodo burnt with the familiar pain of rejection. Suddenly, she wanted nothing more in her life than to enter that church, alongside the Doctor. She pushed forward, hardly caring about the complaining people into whose ribs and faces her elbows flailed. She was slightly built, and so could weave

herself through gaps that force would not have opened for her. In seconds, she was at the front of the eager crowd. But seconds too late.

The manager had beckoned the last of his five volunteers forward. The steps were crowded with six human beings and five gods, from whom all but the Doctor struggled to keep a respectful, awkward distance. 'Wait!' cried Dodo in desperation. 'You can't leave me out here. I'm with him! I –' (she thought quickly) – 'have to look after him!'

The Doctor was affronted. 'Look after...? I – I – well, I've never heard such arrant... indeed!' he blustered.

'Sorry, kid, we're full. You'll have to wait for your granddad outside, OK?'

'Wait!'

The Patriarch had noticed Dodo. He moved closer to inspect her, with the aloof fascination of an infant regarding a new species of insect. She felt an urge to tremble beneath his gaze, or to fall to her knees. 'This one yearns so greatly to accompany us.'

'But you only have time for five, My Lord,' the chagrined manager reminded him through gritted teeth, 'and we have five already.'

'I do not see how one more person will delay us unduly,' boomed the Patriarch cheerfully. 'Come along, my girl.'

Dodo grinned and hopped onto the steps, even as the first of the gods re-entered the church. The Doctor immediately darted to her side and snatched her away from the Patriarch, enfolding her protectively in his cloak.

'I had intended to keep you out of this matter,' he said sternly. 'This is no place for a child.'

'I can take care of myself, thank you very much!'

The Doctor sighed. 'So much like young Susan... well, Dorothea, you must stick with me at all times and do precisely as I say, do you hear me? You have no conception of the – of the – well, whatever is, it could very well prove to be dangerous.'

'Yes, Doctor,' said Dodo, being sure to appear suitably chastened. It was clear to her that he did not know what to expect inside the church either.

But, whatever was there, it had to be more interesting than a wet weekend in Wimbledon.

Kathy swore, loudly and repeatedly. 'I'm sure Smythe was deliberately ignoring me,' she fumed, 'just 'cos I wrote that story about him defrauding the medical charity. I need to get into that church! Lance, check round the back, see if there's another way in.'

'There isn't.'

'Check again! But don't go too far. When those mugs come back out, I want to be the first to get hold of one. Well hurry up, then!'

'I thought you said this wasn't important,' complained Lance.

'Don't you have eyes, kid? This is the biggest story of the year! Either I'm gonna nail that little worm for his biggest lie yet, or... look, just do as you're told, OK?'

Lance did as he was told.

Kathy glared at the church door, weighing up her chances of getting past its guards and deciding that they didn't amount to much. She would have to be patient. It would not be easy. Her guts ached with a desperate longing to know what was happening, and with the gnawing suspicion that these 'gods' were related to *her* story. The important one.

Smythe entered the church last, seething at the Patriarch's contradiction of him in public and at the gods' premature entrance. He needed to have words with them, once they were alone. They might think themselves clever now, but they would never forge a successful showbiz career without following their manager's advice.

So caught up was Smythe in his own bitterness that he failed to register the coos and gasps of his five – or rather, six – volunteers. He came up short upon seeing what had earned their appreciation.

In the few minutes since he had last seen it, the interior of the church had changed. No, changed was too faint a word for it. There had been a transformation.

The walls and floor had been finished with polished marble. Gold trim lent a touch of the luxurious to fluted colonnades. The pews had been repaired and varnished, their arms carved into ornate patterns. A flame burnt in a brazier before the altar. The faint scent of incense had replaced other, less palatable, smells. Although it retained the same basic shape, the building seemed far larger than before. Certainly lighter. Its surfaces shone.

But all this Smythe barely had time to take in. For his eyes, like those of his visitors, were drawn inexorably to the window. The big picture window, behind the altar. Smythe didn't remember seeing it before. If it had been there, then it had certainly been boarded up. And, beneath the boards, it had not looked like this.

Depicted in stained glass was a scene of breath-taking beauty. A regal man swept through a field where lush grass swayed gently. Animals of all kinds – rabbits and goats and sheep and cows and, somehow, every other thing that Smythe could think of in that moment – bounded up to the man to express their joy and, yes, gratitude to him. The exquisite colours bled out of the picture, refracted by pure, brilliant and impossible sunlight from beyond. The detail was incredible. The impression of motion was uncanny.

And the man in the picture was the Patriarch.

The manager guy was taking his act too far, thought Dodo. Sure, she was impressed – who wouldn't be? – but he must have seen this before. Probably worked for weeks with decorators and glaziers to get it all sorted. And yet, he had contrived to appear more stunned than anyone else. He only reinforced her view that this was a carefully planned con. She resolved to keep her eyes open. If the Doctor wasn't going to be taken in, then she wasn't either.

The gods strode (no, swept, and majestically at that) up the single step and towards the altar. The Patriarch stood before it, and behind the brazier, with his four subordinates flanking him. The human entourage came to a halt before the step, as if sharing the perception that they should not elevate themselves to the level of their deities. Dodo wondered if they were expected to kneel, but, to her relief, nobody did.

The Patriarch performed some weird arcane ritual, waving his arms about and muttering in what might have been Latin. Then he said: 'The gods are ready to give counsel. Who would come to us first?'

There was an embarrassed moment of shuffling, and then the Patriarch pointed to an old and stooped woman, and beckoned her forward with a sweep of his arm. She had difficulty mounting the step, fumbling with her walking stick. Dodo moved to assist her. The old woman leaned on her gratefully, and Dodo eased herself free when she saw that she could cross the rest of the distance unaided. The woman

hobbled forward, and Dodo suddenly felt exposed. She hurried back down to rejoin the others.

'And how is it that you require our aid, dear lady?' the Patriarch asked.

'Please, sir,' the woman said in a cracked and thin voice, 'it is my joints.'

'They cause you pain, do they not?'

She nodded dumbly, as if astonished that the Patriarch could have read her mind. A simple deduction, Dodo thought sceptically

'Well, we cannot have that, can we?'

The Patriarch laid a gentle hand on the old woman's head. Dodo had the fleeting impression of golden energy transferring itself from his body to hers. It was over in seconds, and then the woman straightened, cautiously, and a look of hope and then wonder crossed her face. She walked back to the group, unsteady at first but gaining confidence with each step until, by the time she reached them, she had the bearing of a much younger person. She was in tears of joy as she turned back and said: 'Thank you, sir. Oh, thank you so much indeed.' And she fell to her knees and prayed, and two of the other volunteers joined her.

(Why didn't she just enact the whole cliché and cast away her walking stick?)

Next, a middle-aged man with shabby clothes and dirty stubble was summoned forward. He asked for money, and cited a list of recent woes. Again, his request was granted. He was told that, by the grace of the God of Materialism, he would find a sizeable sum in his long-neglected bank account. Another trick? There was no immediate evidence of the gods' aid this time, despite the reactions of some. Dodo half expected her fellow volunteers to burst into *The Hallelujah Chorus*. Perhaps the manager would find a way of transferring money into the man's account before he looked? To buy his belief, and the belief of all he told.

Dodo decided to ask for world peace.

The Doctor was next (so now, thought Dodo, we'll get somewhere).

'What is it you need?' asked the Patriarch.

'Information,' said the Doctor.

'Simply information?'

The manager started forward, a concerned look on his face. 'The gods have no statement to make at this time, sir. Are you with the press?'

The Doctor ignored him. 'It is a humble request, My Lord. I am a mere seeker of knowledge, and I can see that you have a good deal to spare.'

Dodo tried (and failed) to hide a smile. The old man was running rings around them. Bringing down a large-scale scam for the sake of it. Hard to believe that this morning she had been... oh. Well, she had been in London, anyway.

The Patriarch dismissed his manager with a gesture, and turned his attention fully upon the Doctor. 'And what is it you wish to know from us, young man?'

The Doctor harrumphed at this term of address, and then composed himself and said: 'I would like to know precisely who you are and what your purpose is on this world.'

The Patriarch was amused. 'He wishes to have more proof before he will believe in us,' he proclaimed, addressing his fellow gods. They laughed, not unkindly.

'And what,' asked the Doctor icily, 'is your answer?'

Kathy was steadying her nerves with a quick smoke, when the army arrived. Their vehicles closed in from all three directions, squealing to a stop and disgorging at least two dozen soldiers, who began to disperse the scandalised crowd. Startled into action, Kathy propelled Lance into the thick of things, barking out instructions. Aim here, aim there, shoot that. Many people did not want to leave, and howls of protest clashed with the ever more threatening orders of noncommissioned officers. Kathy managed to grab one of them, her notebook at the ready 'What are you doing here? What gives you the right to break up this peaceful gathering? Are you interested in these people who claim to be gods?' She was told, in no uncertain terms, to vacate the area.

Another soldier stood in the back of an open-topped jeep, a bullhorn to his lips. 'We have reason to believe you are all in danger,' he broadcast. 'Please co-operate with us as we clear the immediate vicinity of the church. Any resistance will be met with necessary force.'

Slowly but surely, the struggle was being lost. Ticker-tape barriers were being erected, a block away in each direction. Armed guards ensured that nobody crossed them, once they had been expelled beyond the cordon. The final few

stragglers were physically lifted, by two or three men at a time, and hauled away.

Then a detail of some twelve men formed and marched up the steps towards the door of the church. And Kathy's heart performed somersaults as she saw who was at its head.

'This world is torn by conflict,' contested the Patriarch. Though answering the Doctor's question, he projected his voice to take in all those present. To Dodo's disappointment, he had the air of one delivering a prepared speech. 'In the days since our return, we have learned much of the concerns of your people. The shadow of annihilation hangs heavy over you. War is being fought in the country called Vietnam, and many fear that your Cold War will escalate into a deadly nuclear conflict. Fear of crime is no less prevalent. There are those who roam your streets looking only to mug, rape and kill. Black men fight for their rights; your young fight for the right to their own culture. In every aspect of your lives, battle lines are being drawn.

'We have manifested ourselves in this way before. Our deeds in those long-gone days have passed into your legends. We appeared to the races of old, each according to his own expectations. We were the Gods of Greece, of Rome, of Scandinavia. I have been Zeus and Jupiter and Odin, and so many, many more. We are needed now, more than ever, and so we have come to you again. We are here to help you, but we can only do this if you believe in us.'

Yep, thought Dodo as applause broke out, world peace it is (but what gave her the faint impression that the Patriarch might be able to deliver after all?).

Then the door was barged unceremoniously open. The church was suddenly filled with soldiers. And the light from the stained glass window faded and died.

Everything happened too fast, the next moments blurring by. The soldiers shouted at everybody to stay still. Dodo obeyed. They were holding rifles. The occupants of the church were rounded up. Dodo caught a glimpse of the Doctor, apprehended alone by the altar. He struggled, demanding imperiously that his captors unhand him. Dodo watched in disbelief as handcuffs were snapped onto her wrists. She was dragged out of the building. Something was flung over her, cutting off her sight. 'Hey,' she protested, 'you can't do this, we've done nothing wrong!' And then she heard

the sound of a door opening, and she was hoisted upwards and thrust rudely into the back of a truck. She yanked the blanket from her head, and a still-blinded Doctor staggered into her. By the time they had righted themselves, the complaining form of the gods' manager blocked their exit from the vehicle.

'Look,' conceded one of the soldiers, ground down by the manager's protests, 'we're just going to take you to our base. You'll be questioned and checked over and then probably released, OK?' Then he slammed the back doors firmly shut.

Dodo would have tried to open them, but the manager beat her to it. His wrists were manacled too, but he hammered on the thick, barred windows with both fists and screamed about his rights. 'Do you know who I am? I'm Alexander Lullington-Smythe! I know people who know people. I can have you court-martialled, do you hear me?' The truck jerked into motion, and he lost his balance and sprawled backwards onto the floor.

A bare wooden bench ran down each side of the truck, from the doors to a solid partition, which separated this section from the cab. The Doctor sat on one side, deflated and tired. Dodo took the place next to him, and held his hand encouragingly.

There were five prisoners altogether: Dodo, the Doctor, Smythe and two of the other volunteers. One was the woman who had been 'cured'. She sat in the corner and did not look at the others, as if she was ashamed. Of being in trouble with the authorities? Or of what had happened in the church? 'Did anybody see what happened to the others?' asked Dodo.

'I saw the guy who asked for money. They put him in another truck. The young woman too, I think.' The speaker was a fair-haired young man, with blotchy skin and a weak attempt at a moustache. 'Last time I saw the Patriarch's bunch, though, was before the soldiers burst in.'

'Me too,' said Dodo. The Patriarch's bunch? This man had been kneeling in prayer to them, a few moments ago. The sudden shock of reality had well and truly shattered their spell.

Smythe had picked himself up, and his expression lightened at this. 'You think they might have escaped?'

'God knows how,' said the other man. He smiled weakly as he realised what he had said.

Dodo fought to keep her balance as the truck rounded a corner at speed. Its suspension wasn't all it could have been. Smythe flailed and hit the wall heavily. 'I need to get out of these handcuffs,' he whined. 'Metal brings me out in a rash. What do they want with us anyway? What do you think they're going to do?'

'Examine us, from the sound of things,' recalled Dodo.

'What for? What are they after?'

'Not us, I'll bet.'

'They think we're the gods, don't they? They actually think we're the gods!'

'Yes,' agreed the fair-haired man, 'but what do they think the gods are?'

'I think,' said Dodo, 'that's what they're trying to find out.' She laughed, finding her first glimmer of satisfaction in this predicament. 'Well they're in for a surprise, aren't they, when they do all their tests and what-have-you and find out they've goofed; that they've picked up seven perfectly normal human beings.'

The fair-haired man smiled with her, but Smythe had descended into sullen contemplation. The Doctor, too, was uncharacteristically reticent.

He was there again. He had emerged from the church to oversee the removal of Smythe and his volunteers. Now he climbed back into his jeep. Kathy's stomach felt empty. His presence confirmed all that she had hoped for, and dreaded, about the gods. She had been paralysed too long with indecision; unable to shoulder her way past the guards when finally she had acted. He was leaving her again, and she wanted to cry out to him. But none of the old words, the familiar terms of address, seemed appropriate.

'General!' she yelled. 'General Marchant! Over here, please!'

Perhaps he hadn't heard her. She was just one of a dozen reporters, crying out for the official story. He left, and Kathy Marchant ached with longing.

Make or break time. It was a frightening prospect.

The cordon was dropped with surprising speed, but each minute of the wait was agonising. Even before the last soldiers had departed, Kathy joined the forward surge of the most eager members of the crowd. She was the third or fourth person onto the church steps, doubtless sharing the

thoughts of the others, knowing what the general probably did not: that the gods were still in there, somehow.

The stench hit her first, the darkness second. She stood by the door until her senses adjusted to both. She could see the shapes of rotting pews and the scrawl of offensive graffiti in the gloom. It had begun to rain again. Stray droplets sprayed through the gaping hole in the roof, and dampened her face. Although some game soul had decided to check behind the altar, there was no doubt in Kathy's mind what had happened. A woman beside her wept, as she came to the same conclusion. The prevalent reaction, though, was one of stunned silence.

The gods had abandoned their world.

Chapter Six

PREPARATIONS FOR WAR [extract]

As soon as the army stormed the church, the so-called gods got off, through a back door or something. It confirmed my suspicions that they would run like that, but I hadn't realised the army was interested in them too. The general in charge of the operation, who I've been told I can't name for legal reasons if you can believe that, wanted me to go to a secret location with him and tell him everything I'd learned. I was happy to help, of course. I have always been willing to do my bit for my country.

We compared notes at the army's top secret HQ, and the general told me these gods or whatever they were had arrived on Earth in a spaceship. Well, of course, I was interested. I'd been fascinated by aliens since I was a child, and I...

[two pages of personal history snipped]

...so it didn't surprise me in the least to hear that my clients of the last few days had come down from another planet.

What I didn't know then was that the aliens knew all about the secret base and had their eyes on it. I can only assume they were worried about what I might have discovered about them. They knew now how I was shrewder than I'd made them believe at first. They had to do something to stop my information getting into the wrong hands, and that's why I soon found myself in the middle of a war zone.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let me tell you all about my supper with the general.

How I Saved the World by Alexander Lullington-Smythe,
pub. Aphrodite Ltd, 1976

'Well, at least they've put us somewhere comfortable,' said Dodo. 'I was expecting a cell.'

'Cells come in all manner of disguises, Dorothea,' said the Doctor. 'You do know there is an armed guard outside that door, hmm?'

'I know.' Dodo sighed and sank into the couch. However tired she was, she could not settle. Too much had happened for that. Her eyes flicked restlessly around the room: an airman's quarters, long unused to judge by the amount of dust. It had been decorated in the drab tones of government facilities the world over. A battered calendar added a touch of colour. It had been torn out of a magazine, and it portrayed a scantily-clad buxom gymnast above a list of dates in 1962. Two windows looked out over a bare concrete expanse. Other ugly, box-shaped buildings were visible.

When the prisoners had been split up, the Doctor had insisted that he and Dodo remain together. He had called her his grandchild, and, for a weird moment, she had found herself wishing it were true.

'We could break one of the windows and make a run for it,' she suggested brightly.

'Oh, think, child, think! Where would we run to, hmm? That's if these old legs of mine were built for such a thing in the first place.'

'I was only saying!'

Dodo sighed again. She almost looked forward to her promised interrogation. It would be something to do, and an opportunity, perhaps, to learn more about what was going on. To pass the time before then, she turned on the television set.

'I do hope young Steven isn't too worried about us,' muttered the Doctor. 'If he hadn't been in such an infernal hurry to be leaving, I could have given him a key to the TARDIS.'

'They did bring us a long way out of the city, didn't they? I don't think there's much chance of getting back there before morning.'

As the set warmed up, an image formed of a smartly turned-out young man. He looked imploringly out of the screen and explained why his beliefs necessitated that people send him money. Dodo would have changed channels immediately (now that she thought about it, she was itching to explore the multiple options available in this wonderful country), but she was too agog at her realisation that the image was in colour.

'Now, more than ever,' orated the young man, 'your belief is vital. For, as it was written, the gods have returned to Earth. They have made their church in New York City. The

day of their judgement is at hand, and it is only those who believe, fully and without reservation, who will weather the coming storm.'

'Doctor, did you hear that? He's talking about the gods – I mean, whatever they are.'

The Doctor nodded solemnly. 'Word is spreading.'

'But so quickly?'

'In this modern age, my child, nothing travels more quickly than information, and nothing can influence the mind quite so drastically as authoritative information. Our friend Mr Lullington-Smythe and his colleagues are doing a very good job of manipulating your media. It seems they are achieving precisely what they have set out to achieve.'

Byron Carter could think of better ways to spend a Saturday night. Most involved a mug of hot cocoa. Why Marchant had chosen him to conduct the examinations, he did not know. Perhaps to make up for his earlier display of weakness. Perhaps the general just wanted to keep an eye on him. The exercise, it seemed, would prove fruitless. Midnight was approaching as, for the third time, Carter measured a prisoner's pulse rate, tested his reflexes and checked his respiration and temperature. For the third time, he came to the same conclusion. Alexander Lullington-Smythe was human, or, if not that, then at least a good facsimile. And, for the third time, Marchant's questions were eliciting the same story.

'I tell you, the gods vanished. I don't know how, they just went.'

Marchant's nostrils flared as he failed to conceal his mounting anger. He had cast aside his jacket and rolled up his shirtsleeves. The pressure was getting to him. Nice to know, thought Carter, that he had emotions after all. 'Damn it, man, we had that church sealed tighter than a drum. There's no way five people could have slipped out past us. No way at all!'

'Well, what do you expect me to do about it?' protested Smythe.

'I expect to hear the truth from you.'

'I've told you the truth. Ask the others, they all saw the same.'

'You've cooked up this cock-and-bull story between you!'

'We haven't, I swear it! Look, these gods, they really do have powers. I thought they were just fakes, I really did, but they can do anything!'

'I've heard all about your friends' "tricks".'

'But nobody else saw this. They changed the inside of the –'

'Now listen here, mister!' Marchant had been pacing the bare room, circling his prey. Now, with a suddenness that made Carter jump, he grabbed the back of Smythe's wooden chair and twisted it around to face him. Smythe gave a squeal, his legs splaying out as he fought to keep himself from falling. Marchant leaned over him, his face an inch from Smythe's. 'I know there were things inside that church – creatures capable of altering their forms. I think you know who they are. If you don't tell me, and if Professor Carter here can't weed them out with his stethoscope, then you know what he's going to have to do, don't you?'

Smythe shook his head dumbly.

'He'll have to cut the whole damn lot of you open, one by one, to see what's inside. And you, Mr Lullington-Smythe, will be at the front of the queue!'

'I want a lawyer,' Smythe bleated.

'Now, Miss Chaplet, perhaps you could tell me, in your own words, how you came to be in the church this evening?'

The soldier who had introduced himself as General Marchant seemed weary. So did the tall, balding professor type who was even now timing the pulse in her wrist with a stopwatch. Ignoring him, Dodo crossed her legs and leant back as far as she could in the creaking wooden chair. She resolved to appear as co-operative as possible. 'It was because of the rumours really, about the healers and all. The Doctor – he's my friend – thought we should investigate, and, well, when that manager bloke asked for volunteers from the audience, we put ourselves forward.'

'I see. Just members of the public, then. Going about your business.'

'That's right. Well, we were curious, weren't we? Have you found out anything? About these god people, I mean?'

'I suppose you saw them commit miracles too?'

'Oh no. Well, yes – but nothing that couldn't have been a con. I mean, I thought they might have plants in the audience, you know? It would have been dead easy to set

up. Your men kind of broke the whole thing up, just as the Doctor was up there. He would've exposed them, I'm positive.'

'The Doctor?'

'Yes, you know. You picked him up with me. A nice old bloke. He can be a bit of a grump at times, but on the whole he's quite gear really.'

'Your friend, you say?'

'Oh yes. Well, I haven't known him long. Only since this morning, in fact. Hey!' The scientist had tapped Dodo's knee with a small hammer. He flashed her an apologetic smile, and slipped a thermometer into her mouth.

'And yet,' said Marchant, 'this man claims to be your grandfather?'

'Oh.'

'Where did you meet him, Miss Chaplet?'

'On Wimbledon Common, in London,' Dodo mumbled. As the scientist removed his thermometer, she blurted out: 'But, listen –'

'May I see your passport, Miss Chaplet?'

'I don't have one.'

'I see. And where are you staying in New York?'

Dodo shrugged, and cursed herself for allowing the exchange to take this course. What could she say? The Doctor's invention was supposed to be a secret, wasn't it? He certainly hadn't wanted the police back home to see it. How could she betray him?

Marchant squatted before her, bringing his face level with hers. He no longer seemed tired. His green eyes glistened eagerly. 'What do you know about this Doctor of yours, Miss Chaplet? Can you give me his full name?'

'Well, no. He's just the Doctor.'

'And does he come from England too?'

'I don't know. I think so. Look, why are you asking me about him? I thought you wanted to know about those people in the church. I can remember some of their names.'

'All in good time, young lady. Does your mother know where you are?'

'I don't have a mother.'

'Your father then, or guardian. How old are you, Miss Chaplet?'

'I don't... I mean, no! No, you won't get me to say anything else! Leave the Doctor alone, he's done nobody any harm!'

Marchant straightened and turned to the scientist, an eyebrow raised. 'Professor Carter?'

'She tests normal.'

The general nodded, and Carter rapped smartly on the door. The two soldiers who had brought Dodo here strode back in. They lifted her to her feet, and began to escort her away. At the door, she turned back to General Marchant. He was smiling grimly. 'Solo quarters for Miss Chaplet this time, I think, gentlemen.'

'Yes, sir,' said one of the soldiers.

Dodo wanted to say something, but she had the sick feeling that she had said rather too much already.

'I would rather stand, thank you,' said the man known as the Doctor, as General Marchant waved him towards the chair.

'Very well, then.'

Marchant squared up to his latest suspect and appraised him coolly. He remembered seeing him earlier and dismissing him as a harmless old man. A bad decision. He should have realised that appearances were deceptive, now of all times.

The Doctor seemed anything but harmless now. He returned the general's stare without any of the trepidation that Marchant was used to seeing. His head was tilted back, his face set into a slightly aloof expression of determination. Though he carried a walking cane, he seemed staunch and vigorous and more than able to hold his own. He comported himself as if it was he who was in command here.

If he wanted a battle of wills, then he had chosen the wrong opponent.

'Your name?' rapped Marchant, taking an icy tone.

'You may call me the Doctor.'

'Full name!'

'Oh, my dear fellow,' the old man chuckled, 'you wouldn't be able to pronounce the first syllable of it.'

'Foreign, is it?'

'You could say that.' The Doctor's face suddenly hardened again. 'Now listen to me, young man: before I answer your confounded questions, I would like to know what you have done with my companion. Well?'

'Miss Chaplet was extremely helpful to us.'

'I am very pleased to hear it. Now where is she?'

'How did she come to be with you, Doctor?'

'We met this morning. She expressed an interest in travelling with me.'

'When you first arrived here, you claimed to be the girl's grandfather.'

'Did I? Ah, well, poor Dorothea was a little frightened. I thought it best I stayed with her. A harmless white lie. Really, I don't know what all this fuss is about.'

Marchant scowled. This Doctor was shrewd. He had guessed what the Chaplet girl had revealed, and was determined to obfuscate. 'You met her in London?'

'That is correct.'

'And you brought her to the States without her guardian's consent?'

'Is that what she told you?'

'She told me she has no passport.'

'Have you considered that she might be mistaken? How do you imagine I smuggled the girl through your customs, hnnun? Concealed her in the bottom of my suitcase?' The Doctor was laughing again. Marchant felt his cheeks burning.

'That,' he snapped, 'is what I would like you to tell me!' Carter had been hovering in the background, and Marchant nodded towards him. The scientist stepped forward and took the Doctor's wrist. The old man yanked his hand away.

'And just what do you think you are trying to do, sir?'

'A cursory examination, Doctor,' said Marchant. 'We won't harm you.'

'Well you can keep your examination to yourself. I will not be pawed like a – like a – I am a free citizen!' The Doctor's air of confidence had dissipated. He was uncertain, nervous, falling over his words. He tried to hide it with bluster, rounding on the general. 'I demand to know on what charges you are holding my young friend and myself. I want to know where you have taken Dorothea and I insist on speaking to her this instant!'

'At best, Doctor Whoever-You-Are, I can charge you with the kidnapping of a juvenile. I'd also be interested to learn just what it is you intend to do with her.'

'I hope you are not trying to imply –'

Marchant raised his voice to shout over the Doctor's impotent rage. 'You can agree to be checked over by Professor Carter here, or I can order my men to hold you down while we conduct a full examination.'

'On whose authority, sir?'

'I have the authority to do whatever I deem fit to preserve the security of this world!'

Marchant and the Doctor locked glares for a long moment. The Doctor's teeth were gritted, and he visibly seethed. When, at last, Carter found the nerve to step forward and to take the old man's wrist again, he sagged in resignation. He stood patiently and looked down at the floor, as Carter measured his pulse and frowned. He produced his stethoscope and slipped it beneath the Doctor's jacket at the back. He listened for a full minute, his face growing ever more ashen and serious. At last, he removed his instrument and nodded dumbly to the general. Marchant could not suppress a triumphant smile.

'Congratulations, Professor Carter,' said the Doctor quietly, his voice like a mounting thunderstorm. 'Oh yes, congratulations indeed. You have uncovered my little secret, it seems. So what precisely do you intend to do now, hmm? Drag me down to your laboratory? Dissect me? Find out what makes me tick? Or do you only do that to the non-humanoid life forms? The ones who can't speak your language?'

Carter shrank away, cowed by the Doctor's challenge. But no words would deflect Marchant from his duty. 'Perhaps,' he said deliberately, 'you can suggest an alternative?'

The Doctor glared at him again. His expression was as angry and stubborn as ever, but the trepidation was there now, in his eyes. It afforded Marchant his first moment of satisfaction in over a week.

At which point, an explosion rocked the building.

Dodo had been pacing the length of a second barrack room, identical in layout to the first. She was almost knocked off her feet as the ground shook beneath her. Instinctively, she ran for the door and hammered on it with her fists. 'Hey, what's going on out there?' A siren wailed, and she could hear running footsteps.

She thought about her next move for only a second before discounting the option of staying where she was. The door, she suspected, could not be locked from the outside. She reached for the knob, but hesitated at the thought that her guard might still be at his post. Well, if he was, he wouldn't be able to hear much over this din.

She hoisted a trestle chair over her head, and aimed it at the back window.

Before she could throw it, a second explosion blew the pane inwards. Dodo shrieked as she was thrown back against the wall and showered with glass.

A disused engineering block was burning.

Private Stanley Emerson had wasted precious seconds, staring in slack-jawed horror as flames painted the night sky in flickering orange. The dull crump of another explosion, on the far side of the base, had galvanised him into action.

Soldiers streamed from all corners, converging upon the same spot, behind the mess hall. Stan was thankful: he had been unsure, but he had done the right thing. The same as all the others. Somebody yelled a warning, and Stan was suddenly aware of an object above him. It was small and manoeuvrable. It streaked out of his sight before he could take a proper look. His comrades milled around, indecisive, for a second, studying the smoke-filled sky. Then someone shouted: 'It's coming down on the runway!'

There was no time to feel nervous. Stan just followed the pack. They ran out onto the runway: the narrow strip of tarmac that extended from the base. In the uncertain illumination of flames, there, Stan could not see what his colleagues before him had seen. It was small, though. Not a spaceship. Not an aircraft.

He squinted, and made out a vague shape. A person. A being, rather. Three or four NCOs, at the forefront of the action, were yelling at him to lie flat on the ground.

Somebody had thought to turn on the runway lights. Their harsh white glare stabbed upwards, vaporising shadows and destroying Stan's vision. He blinked spots away, and thought he saw one of the aliens again. The green skin. The fronds protruding from its face. Just as he had seen it in the back street in the city. He tightened his grip on the rifle: his palms were slick with sweat and he thought its wooden furniture might slip through his hands.

He blinked again, and saw that it was just a man. But no less threatening than Stan had imagined, for all that. The stranger's face was heavy with shadows, where no shadows should have been. Red eyes burnt out of their darkness with all the intensity of the fires that raged behind Stan. The stranger's body was squat and bulky; poised for combat. His attire was a combination of leather and steel armour. He wore a chain around his waist. The white light created a halo

effect around him, and, though the man was outnumbered – though Stan was just another figure in the crowd – he knew somehow that his life was in danger.

Somebody fired a shot.

A brief retort accompanied a stinging sensation in Joseph's stomach. He looked down, bewildered, and heard a volley of cracks as more tiny projectiles burst against his skin. They did no harm, but the soldiers' thoughts revealed that harm was their intention.

Joseph had only been trying to think. The psychic cry had come from this location. His groupmate had been here, and had died in agony beneath the humans' knives. How could that be right? It was wrong to kill. So Joseph had struck in righteous rage, but had remembered Dorothea and Neville Albert Miller, and had aimed his wrath at empty structures. Making his point. Attracting their attention. And the human beings had swarmed from their prefabricated shells and had surrounded him, and he had just been trying to think, to work out what he should do. Whether to heed their impatient demands or to exact due punishment for what their kind had done to his.

Then one of their number had tried to do to him what they had already done to his groupmate. Take his life. And, when his first projectile – *bullet* – had proved inadequate, fear had prompted his companions to attempt the same.

So why, thought Joseph, should he not respond in kind?

'Where do you think you're going?' cried Byron Carter, recognising the young lady into whom he had just stumbled in the darkness.

'To see what's going on,' said Dorothea Chaplet defiantly.

'Now look, Miss Chaplet,' Carter shouted over the wailing of the alarm, 'whatever it is, you don't want to get involved – not a girl of your age. The general's ordered all civilians to take shelter in the bunker. Come on, I'll show you.'

He took Miss Chaplet's arm, but she shrugged him off. 'I won't hide away like a child!'

'They're firing guns out there, can't you hear them?'

'And anyway, weren't you with the Doctor? Where is he? What have you done to him?'

'I don't know. He was taken away. Now are you coming or not?'

She thought about that for a moment, then shook her head firmly. 'No. I'm not.'

Carter made a grab for her, but she was too fast for him. She hared off towards the runway, the source of the disturbance.

And, after a brief war between nerves and duty, Carter followed.

There was a fierce crackle of static. The runway lights flickered and buzzed. Six men fell immediately, screaming and writhing, in a visible flash of electrical fire. A stench of ozone and burnt flesh assailed Stan's nostrils. The remaining soldiers scattered, seeking cover where no cover existed. Like those around him, Stan took a half-dozen steps back and dropped into a crouch. He raised his rifle and squinted along its sights. The intruder thundered towards him like a dreadnought, shrugging off a second hail of bullets. Stan whimpered, let off one shot – which went hopelessly wild – and fell backwards in his haste to get back on his feet and run for the trees that lined the valley walls.

The intruder disposed of the base's defence like a maniac rifling through a junk pile. The lucky ones were hurled over his shoulder or into the trees, although many landed at awkward or impossible angles. Others fell with steam rising from their collars, as the intruder's electrical energy whip-cracked out again and again. Stan recognised a buddy of his, Tom Bateman, and knew that the look of astonishment and pain on his blackened face was the image of him that he would always remember. Someone was shouting orders to retreat, but Stanley Emerson was choking on acrid smoke, and he could not rise from his knees.

He stood at last, shakily, and the rifle fell from his deadened fingers. The intruder, to his horror, was directly in front of him. He froze, and could only think of how undermanned Rogers AFB was; how long it would take for reinforcements to arrive, even if somebody was left to call for them. Then an enormous hand took hold of the front of Stan's regulation jumper, and simply plucked him off the ground. A wave of nausea passed over him and he lost control of his body, couldn't even think of a way to fight back. Stan dangled in the intruder's grasp, wondered if he was about to die and felt like crying at the unfairness of it all. What had he done to deserve this?

'You took the life of my groupmate,' the intruder snarled, as if he had read Stan's thoughts. He was talking? Talking at a time like this? Did that give Stan a chance?

'I – I don't know what –' he stammered, his throat dry. He loathed himself for being unable to think of anything more profound. He had been given an opportunity to save himself; to save those colleagues who were still alive and unhurt; to save a world, perhaps. He had been too weak, too stupid and too indecisive to take it.

'No,' the intruder said. 'You don't, do you?'

He dropped Private Stanley Emerson like a sack of garbage. Stan hit the tarmac and bit back a yelp of pain. He felt lightheaded and sick. He couldn't take in the fact that he had been spared. Certainly not while he still lay at his erstwhile attacker's booted feet, exposed and vulnerable. But the creature was no longer interested in him.

General Marchant had arrived on the battlefield. He looked tired but resolute in his shirtsleeves, tie flapping in the night breeze. The intruder turned to face him, and Stan realised only now that the alarm siren had been shut down. Silence fell for an interminable moment, and those soldiers who could still move picked themselves up and fell back into strategic positions. A dozen guns were trained upon the intruder. They had proved to be useless, but what else was there?

'What do you want with my world?' Marchant barked, and Stan was filled with admiration for the man. He had heard that this was one officer who led from the front. He had not believed it until now. Alone as he was, dwarfed by the intruder's bulk and backed up by only a handful of men, the general still looked like a formidable opponent.

'Yes,' the intruder whispered, so quietly that Stan thought he must be the only person who could hear it. 'Yes, I see now.'

'What are your intentions? Can you speak English? I do not want to have to consider you hostile. Do you hear me?'

'Where,' the intruder hissed, in a voice like burning ice, 'are your scientists?'

'What's going on? I can't see!' Dodo complained. 'Who is that man?'

Professor Carter shushed her, which she was thought was unnecessary. From this distance, the figures at the far end of the runway looked small, and their voices could certainly not

be heard. Dodo and Carter hid themselves in the shadow of the Air Traffic Control tower and watched. 'Haven't you seen enough?' asked Carter, his voice trembling. 'We shouldn't even be here! Oh, those poor people...'

'I know,' said Dodo. It made her sick to think of it too. 'But no bunker's going to protect us from him, is it? And I, for one, don't want to just sit around and wait for him to come for us. I'd rather know what's happening. Besides, he's far enough away, isn't he?'

She regretted the words as soon as she had said them (some nonsensical superstition about tempting fate). The intruder turned in her direction, and she knew, just *knew*, that he could see her even though it didn't make sense. Carter knew it too. He stiffened, and emitted a yelping sound like a beaten dog. 'Oh God,' he whispered.

And then the intruder was racing towards them, and Dodo cursed her curiosity and had to physically drag Carter around the corner of the building and scream at him to run.

The rhythm of their footsteps on concrete merged with the clatter of gunfire to form an insane percussion beat. Dodo felt it driving her onward, imagined herself enveloped in a cocoon of sound and knew that, in the otherwise silent canyons of the base, it would not be difficult to detect two desperate, fleeing figures. She looked around for a place to hide, and pulled Carter into an alleyway between two buildings. They crouched behind a pair of gigantic steel bins, and Dodo peered between them, willing her heart to beat more quietly so that she could listen for footsteps.

The intruder was behind her.

She felt him, more than anything. And realised that his was a familiar presence. She gasped as she span around to face him. Joseph didn't seem to see her.

Professor Carter screamed in abject terror as Joseph stalked towards him. He gripped the front of the scientist's shirt and flung him into the bins, with enough force to topple them. Carter landed on his back, and coughed and spluttered and whined. But Joseph's fury was not sated. He stood over his prostrate foe and pinned him down with one immense foot. His right fist was raised, ready to drive into Carter's head. A nimbus of electricity coruscated around it, so that blue sparks crackled off in all directions. Dodo was reminded of the smell of approaching trains on the Underground, and she knew that Joseph's next blow would be fatal. Helplessly,

she flung herself at his back, clinging onto his arm and fighting to keep him from moving it. With no more than a shrug, he sent her reeling into the wall. The impact knocked the breath from her body, and she slid to the ground.

'Y-you can't,' she gasped. 'Joseph!'

'Dorothea?'

He seemed bewildered by her presence. He looked more like the Joseph she had met in London now (his features still patterned after those of Mr Miller, though he no longer reminded her of the old man at all – wasn't that strange?). More the gentle, confused soul, less the engine of destruction. But Dodo could not forget what he had been, a moment before. As she lay and panted and tried to collect herself, she thought carefully about her next words.

Carter had rolled over onto his front, so as not to see his fate. He was muttering something, and Dodo thought he was crying.

'Why do you not wish me to do this thing?' asked Joseph. 'Though we have talked about killing, I have since learned of a saying: "an eye for an eye". Byron Carter is well acquainted with it. He and his fellow scientists took the life of my groupmate.'

'He killed somebody? I don't believe it! He just – I mean, he doesn't look the type!'

'And yet his deeds are clear in his thoughts.'

'Well... ' Dodo fumbled for an argument, climbing to her feet and brushing herself down as a distraction. 'We have other sayings too, you know. "Two wrongs don't make a right" Or... or "Turn the other cheek".'

'You are frightened of me.'

Just like in London. Changing the subject. Catching Dodo off-guard. She didn't know how to answer him. He was right.

'I would not harm you, Dorothea. You are my friend.'

She remembered what he had tried to do (only eighteen hours ago?), and felt more frightened still.

Soldiers had arrived at one end of the alleyway, Marchant at their head. To rescue her? No, that was an insane hope. Dodo knew they could do nothing. The general motioned to his men to stay back, to keep still. He was waiting to see what she would do.

The US Army were actually leaving this to her.

It was the first time in Dodo's life that she had felt important. It terrified her. She wanted to go home, back to her old life. She would never complain of boredom again.

Professor Carter was uttering a prayer. It included a line about the Lord's just vengeance. Something fell into place in Dodo's mind.

'You're one of them, aren't you?' she said. 'One of the gods!'

'I know not of whom you speak.'

'You must do. It all makes sense! The way you can sense things, adapt yourself. The fact that you're here. They're in New York. They were, at least, before the army stormed into their church. They're... oh, look, I know you can read minds or something. You must know what I'm talking about.'

'Yes,' said Joseph, and he said it as if he had just uncovered the most important, the most incredible, truth in the world. 'Yes, you are correct. My group is dead, but another group exists on this world. They will be able to ease my confusion. They can help me.'

He took to the air then, propelling himself upward like a rocket, leaving Dodo agog in his wake. What was he? And why did she find herself missing his presence; wondering if she would see him again?

And then she realised that the soldiers had closed in around her, and that General Marchant stood before her, arms folded, regarding her grimly.

'I think you, young lady, have some explaining to do.'

Chapter Seven

WAITING FOR GODS

There were lights on the streets of SoHo last night. Dozens of candles were lit, as a crowd gathered to conduct an all-night vigil at a church off Spring Street. The gods, they claimed, had come to New York City, only to abandon it. Some people were in tears, whilst others recited prayers. They all had one thing in common: they believed.

'Our gods came back to save us,' proclaimed one follower, 32-year-old Amanda Barrett, a mother of four from Queens, 'and the army drove them away. They were doing nobody any harm. What about those people who still need them? What about us?'

The alleged gods appeared just once to their public, in a short address orchestrated by local PR man Alexander Lullington-Smythe. Lullington-Smythe, who has been involved in a string of notorious frauds, was taken into army custody. It is surprising, then, that his latest partners could have inspired such immediate belief. Certainly, this reporter saw no evidence of miracles, although the five strangers – with the towering man known only as the Patriarch at their head – were undeniably impressive. However, the effect of their brief presence has been nothing less than incredible.

The crowd outside what is being referred to as the Church of the Latter-Day Pantheon grew steadily even after the alleged gods' departure. With the church declared off-limits by consent, for fear of impeding the gods' return, it looked like being a cold night on the streets for many believers as this edition went to press.

'Sure, I'll be staying the night,' insisted bartender Douglas Cameron, 41. 'I heard about the gods over the radio and just had to come here straight from work. I think its amazing. We need gods now, more than even and they have come to answer our prayers.'

'They're all colours at once, right?' said James Grant, an unemployed black youth from the Bronx. 'They won't take any of this discrimination bull. They're here for all of us.' He,

too, has yet to see the alleged gods – but, like everyone else, he is literally praying that they can be persuaded to return.

The objects of all this attention fled the church when armed soldiers laid siege to it yesterday evening. Nobody in the US Army was prepared to comment on the reasons for this action. Nor has it been explained how the alleged gods could have so easily escaped.

A link has been speculated with reports over the past week of

Kathy had been staring at the half-completed feature for twenty minutes, knowing that her final deadline approached. It was almost two o'clock. The presses in the basement were gearing up for their third and final run of the night. Bushkin had bobbed in three times, in increasing states of agitation, to see if his last story for the late morning edition was complete. Kathy wanted to say so much. She did not know where to start.

Should she mention her father by name? No, it did not seem right. And why give all the other hacks in the Big Apple a lead that she could follow alone?

She reached for the telephone and dialled the number again, almost absently. The number that, by now, she knew by heart. She did not know where General Marchant was: some base or other, she imagined. She had been given the number by a high-level contact, who had refused to say another word. She expected to get the usual run-around. Instead, there was an insistent whining, telling her that the phone at the other end had been disconnected.

Kathy slammed down the receiver in frustration.

She looked at her feature again. Stark black letters on white paper. How could she convey the truth behind the type; the emotions that churned within her? She could not, and the mere attempt made her feel like she was laying her soul painfully bare. Bushkin was going to edit the thing anyway. He would probably cut the allegations about Lullington-Smythe. Any references to flying saucers would certainly go.

Kathy Marchant sighed, backspaced to the start of her most recent, incomplete, sentence and typed a line of 'X's to obliterate the words. Why bother? She pulled her work, and its carbon copies, from the typewriter and tossed it into her 'out' tray. She would drop it off with Bushkin on her way out

of the building. She pulled on her coat and swilled down the last of her coffee, grimacing as she realised it was cold.

The elevator came quickly, in no demand at this hour. In the foyer, the night guard, Charlton, bade Kathy a good night. He warned her, for the hundredth time, not to ride the subway home. For the first time, she did not. She was deeply tired, but she knew that persistent thoughts would keep her from sleep. She needed to do something. Return to the church? Probably, yes, though it would mean more waiting, and every rag in the state would have people there now. She needed a new angle. An exclusive. It wasn't going to come from the general. As for the scientist guy, Carter, Kathy wasn't holding her breath.

One thing came to mind.

The information had come to her this morning – Saturday morning, rather. Normally, she would have dismissed it. Too fanciful. A crank call. But this source had proved good in the past, and, after all, stranger things had happened recently.

She would walk down to the church. Grab some fresh air and time to think. On the way, she would swing past 25th Street and take a look – just a quick look – at the blue box. The one that had reportedly appeared from nowhere.

Steven sat with his knees to his chest and his back to the TARDIS. If he concentrated, he could feel the throb of its engines beneath the deceptive wooden exterior. It lulled him into a doze, but he was jettied awake by a sudden clanking noise. He cast around for the source of the disturbance, and saw with relief that the wind had blown a discarded tin can.

He hated himself for being so jumpy. But the street was dark and deserted now, and he could not forget what had happened earlier.

He had to get out of here. Sleep in his own bed, at least.

'Where are you, Doctor?' he complained through gritted teeth. He stood and banged hopelessly on the TARDIS doors. 'Doctor!'

Somebody was watching him: a short woman with dark hair, angular features and a long trench coat. He thought she was middle-aged at first, but her sombre style of dress and the cynical lines on her face had disguised her youth. The woman was regarding Steven with cool interest. He smiled weakly at her, embarrassed.

'Looking for someone?' she asked.

'A friend of mine.'

'In there?'

'No. Not really. I was just – well, we're supposed to be meeting by this thing. He's late.'

'Yours, is it?'

'What? No. No, of course not. I don't know what it is.'

'Don't you? You sound English to me.'

'I am.'

'I thought they had those things all over England. A police box, isn't it?'

'I mean, I don't know what it's doing here. Look, what are all these questions for?'

The woman stepped forward and gave Steven a smile that cracked her face rather than softened it. 'Habit. I'm sorry. My job, you see. I'm a reporter.'

'I see,' said Steven, taking her proffered hand warily.

'Kathy Marchant.'

'Steven Taylor.'

'Looks like your doctor friend isn't showing. Can I buy you a coffee?'

'At this time of night?'

'I know a place.'

'OK,' said Steven, 'you're on.' Perhaps not the wisest decision, he thought. This woman evidently wanted information. He wondered what she had seen, or thought she had seen. Still, he could handle her – and she was right. The Doctor had probably found somewhere to stay, so caught up with his new friend that he had forgotten about his old one. Or he had run into trouble, which would be no surprise at all. Either way, Steven wasn't helping his nerves or his health by waiting around for him. And coffee sounded good right now.

Time travel did offer some advantages, he thought with a smile. The coffee of this time contained that magic stimulant, caffeine. He could use a boost like that right now.

Olive's Diner was a seedy, run-down establishment, tucked away near Union Square, on the outskirts of Greenwich Village. Its eponymous Olive was a sturdy, chain-smoking, down-to-earth woman in her fifties. She kept flexible opening hours, relying on assistants when she slept through the afternoons. She always said that she hated to be lonely at night. The diner had become a haven for insomniacs, and bums who had missed the last beds in the flophouses to the

south. Kathy often went there, if she had been working late. It was a long trek from the *Ranger's* building uptown, but the mutterings she heard were sometimes worth it, and the decor suited her usual dour mood.

A bluebottle was fascinated by the electric light, making tapping sounds as it collided with it over and over. Frank Sinatra was playing on the radio, almost drowned out by static. A single-bar heater glowed red in one corner, its flex trailing dangerously. After eleven, Olive served drinks in paper cups. She beckoned to Kathy and Steven to help themselves to coffee from a steaming jug. She grunted an acknowledgement as Kathy spilled a few coins onto the counter. Olive rarely took money at all this late.

They found a rickety table by the grease-coated window, and sat opposite each other. Old brown rings broke up the blue and white chequerboard pattern of the worn tablecloth. Kathy lit a cigarette, and offered Steven one. He declined. On the way here, they had talked about the weather and New York's tourist spots. Steven had not let anything slip. What had Kathy expected? That he might accidentally refer to a city on Mars, instead of one on Earth?

'So,' he said casually, 'you know what I'm doing out at this time. How about you?'

Kathy shrugged. 'Been working on a story. The news doesn't keep to office hours.'

'And you thought you might just take a tour of the back streets afterwards?'

'Hey, I'm supposed to be asking the questions.'

'You didn't say this was an interview.'

'No.' She was making a mess of this; putting him on his guard. She had pegged him as the square-jawed hero type: amenable enough, not to mention pretty, but with brains in his fists. He was more than that. He was thoughtful and intelligent and cautious. He sat a little way back from the table, and it took Kathy a minute to realise that he was avoiding her smoke. 'No, of course it isn't. I'm just interested, is all. What is that police box doing in New York? How did it get here?'

'What makes you think I know?'

'You spent half an hour trying to get into it!'

Steven raised an eyebrow slightly, giving Kathy that look again: a pleasant, open-faced expression, which said he could never tell a lie nor hide a secret, while all the time his

eyes betrayed the fact that his mind was working faster than he wanted her to know.

She reached into one of her capacious pockets and produced her hip flask. She opened it, and added a measure of whiskey to her coffee. She did so as a delaying tactic, to give herself time to think. And because she damn well needed it. She offered the flask to Steven, but he waved it away politely.

'Look,' said Kathy in exasperation, 'I've got no patience for this, all right? I'm trying to sweet-talk you into letting something slip, taking me into your confidence, and I'm no damn good at it. So why don't you just come across and save me the trouble? Give me enough to make it worthwhile my getting you that coffee, anyway.'

Steven laughed. 'You're subtle, aren't you?'

'Not really. But it's worked before. So come on, spill.'

'I don't know what you want me to tell you.'

'Well, something about the gods would be nice. That's if you can manage it.'

'Gods?' Steven wasn't laughing now. He leaned forward, betraying his fierce interest. 'What gods?'

'You know something?'

'Oh yes,' said Steven, 'I know something.'

Kathy relaxed, and sank back into her chair with a wide grin. 'Then I haven't wasted my quarter after all.'

Steven and Kathy were not the only people heading into SoHo that night. Their path converged with those of late-night revellers, mostly the worse for drink, swaying and giggling as they walked. Somebody shouted something about the vast quantities of money and women that the gods could procure for him. Steven wished he would shut up.

They approached the junction at which the church stood. Steven heard Kathy muttering something, and knew that even she had not expected a crowd of this size. It must have numbered at least five hundred. It stretched along the streets in all three directions from the church. There were reporters and photographers, armed with the tools of their trade; doomsayers with glum expressions and apocalyptic predictions on sandwich boards; police officers, hovering uneasily on the periphery of the gathering; and just normal people, many of them – from the businessmen in their neat suits to the derelicts with their layers of shoddy clothing and

bottles in brown paper bags. All strata of humanity were represented here tonight, all joined in one purpose. Their candles shone like beacons to the stars, and, for a moment, Steven was swept up in the romanticism of it all, and thought it a beautiful sight.

As beautiful as it was disturbing.

'What are they all here for? What are they expecting?'

Kathy shrugged. 'What does anyone expect from their gods? Don't you believe?'

'Well, in a way,' said Steven. At least, he had always hoped, in the back of his mind, that there was something. He had never belonged to a church, though. He had seen too much pain caused by religious dogma, most recently in France. He preferred to take an empirical approach. He believed in what he saw, and just tried to make the best of it. 'But not in all this – this circus. Most of these people can't even have seen this afternoon's show.'

'But they've heard about it – and they think there's something in it.'

'Without proof?'

'Handy thing about faith, that.'

'They'd have to be desperate!'

'They live here, don't they? Of course they're desperate! They're looking for hope, like all of us; clutching at straws because they might, just might, find salvation. If Alexander Lullington-Smythe is exploiting that, well, I'll do everything in my power to make sure he's crucified by the media.'

'I don't know what we came here for, if these gods, or whatever they are, are long gone.'

'These people think they'll come back. Perhaps they will. Anyway, I thought you had nowhere else to go.'

'Not at the moment, no.'

'So why don't we join the vigil?'

Why not indeed? It was a distraction, at least, and Steven did genuinely want to learn more about the mysterious Norman. He had lost him only a few blocks from here, when the soldier boy had challenged him. This seemed like the best place to find him again. With luck, he might find the Doctor too. Steven had known the old man long enough to know that an occurrence of this magnitude would draw him in as light does a moth.

They found an empty stretch of kerb, half a block from the church, and perched on it. 'It's almost four,' observed Kathy.

'It looks like this is gonna go on all night, and all tomorrow too I should think I wonder what it'll take to end it?'

Steven said nothing, and, a minute later, Kathy asked him: 'What do you think they are?'

'Huh?'

'The gods. You've met one. What do you think? Are they human?'

'It's hard to say. I saw what Norman could do. I didn't imagine that.'

'What else could he be, then?'

'He could have psi-powers. He could be humanoid but not human. Or something else altogether, in humanoid form.' Steven turned, and saw that Kathy was staring at him, her face alight with interest. No wonder. His words had betrayed a frame of reference almost inconceivable to someone of this time. He had begun to relax around her, perhaps too much. It didn't matter. He had begun to trust her too; to see the vulnerable, likeable woman beneath the brusque façade. And he hadn't told her much. He could have regretted his slip; could have been more careful in future. He laughed instead. 'In case you're wondering, I am human myself.'

'I know,' protested Kathy. But she appeared to be disappointed.

The night dragged on. Cigarettes and alcohol did little to drive away the numbing cold and aching tiredness. The crowd had settled into a subdued mood. Only a few murmurs, snores and the odd drunken shout punctuated silence. Kathy had dozed for seconds or minutes or an hour, her head against Steven's shoulder.

'It's funny,' she said reflectively, 'that a few hours ago we hadn't even met, and now we're sharing a night like this. We don't even know a thing about each other.'

'I'm used to that,' said Steven, with a sigh. 'I do a lot of travelling. I don't get time to make many friends. You learn to take people more or less at face value. Deal with them as you find them, before you move on.'

'Are you moving on from here?'

He nodded. 'As soon as I find my friend. I will stop, soon, but not here. Not now.'

Kathy laughed, but the laugh emerged as a snort. 'Can't say I blame you. There must be a better place than this.'

'I hope so.'

'Why do we do the things we do?'

Steven looked at her. She had surprised him with the question. Surprised herself, too.

'My father's with the army, you know. In charge of investigating flying saucers. Covering them up. Lying. Making sure we don't find out. Why do that?' She was slurring her words. She had emptied her hip flask, but had not eaten since breakfast. She didn't care.

'You think he's hiding something about the gods? You think they're aliens?'

'Doesn't matter. Shouldn't do it, that's all.'

'His job is the opposite of yours, isn't it?'

'Haven't thought about it before,' Kathy lied. 'Just want to know, that's all. Flying saucers. Bit of an obsession with me, I'm afraid. Just want to know why they keep the truth from us. That's all.' Yeah, she thought, that's all. I haven't let one person dictate my whole career.

'Look,' said Steven at length, 'I really can't say too much, but I can tell you that the gods are probably not from this world. Aliens do exist. I've met no end of them.'

Or perhaps he had said no such thing. Kathy had slumped against his shoulder again, and his words were distant like dreams as she descended into a dark pool of sleep.

The approach of dawn was bringing a grey tinge to the sky, when somebody finally decided to take action against the cold. A heap of litter had been gathered in the middle of the street and, after several attempts, set ablaze. The attendant police officers looked uncertain, and called for advice and then for reinforcements on their walkie-talkies. Then four of them assembled into a line and shouldered their way towards the fire. They demanded that it be extinguished. An argument broke out. Somebody was pushed.

Steven had been half-asleep, not really paying attention. He struggled to his feet as he realised what was happening. Kathy groaned as the sudden movement dislodged her head and woke her. By then, it was too late. A jostling motion had spread through the crowd, and Steven was buffeted as he pushed his way towards the source of the disturbance. Voices had been raised. A policeman drew his gun.

The first punch was thrown.

The streets erupted into violence.

A woman squealed as she was knocked off her feet, held in mid-fall for a second by the seething mass around her before slipping to the ground. Steven took an elbow to his face as he stooped to reach her, to help. He pushed back by reflex. A hand gripped his shoulder, and he was whirled around to face a burly, middle-aged man, muscles rippling beneath his checked shirt. A fist swung towards Steven's head. He caught it and twisted, and the man dropped to his knees with a whimper. Steven had no interest in prolonging the confrontation. Pushed and prodded from all sides, it was becoming harder to maintain his balance; more so to actually move. People shouted to be heard, but succeeded only in adding to the clamour. Steven felt a familiar sick pang of helplessness, exacerbated by the realisation that he had lost sight of Kathy.

A desperate police officer, caught in the centre of the mêlée, fired a shot into the air. He only increased the panic. The crowd surged over him, and he disappeared beneath it. A teenaged boy with gaps in his teeth and a skull design on the back of his leather jacket seized his gun and brandished it in triumph.

Somebody yelled in pain, as they toppled on to the fire.

Steven could hear sirens and the screeching of tyres.

'Pigs!' a woman shrieked, by his ear. 'You can't take our gods away from us!'

The youth with the stolen gun fired it, and cackled. He aimed high, but a whole section of the throng collapsed as people tried to duck, to run, to find cover, and managed only to fall and to bring down others. Steven made his way towards the boy, lent strength and determination by grim purpose. He was about to tackle him, when the gun swung in his direction. The boy made some sort of threat, but Steven could not hear it.

'Look, just put that thing down!' he shouted. 'You'll make things worse.'

The boy sneered, but his expression changed to one of surprise as somebody blundered into him from behind and the gun flew from his grasp. Steven sprang forward and tried to catch it, but it disappeared beneath a dozen writhing bodies. Suddenly, Steven was caught in the middle of another skirmish. By the time he could give a thought to anything other than defending himself, he could not guess

how far he had moved, nor find a landmark in the ever-shifting mass of people.

The rising of a collective gasp and a light shower of water in his hair were Steven's first indications that the police were using a water cannon.

Kathy fought her way to the edge of the disturbance, shouting for Steven but knowing she could not be heard. She wasn't worried about his personal safety – she just didn't want to lose a vital source of information. Not when she was so close.

She should have seen this coming; should have recognised the signs of single-minded purpose and disaffection with authorities, which had sparked similar riots before. But it had all blown up so quickly. She had underestimated the public's strength of feeling. Now all she could do was stay clear and take notes.

'Hey, buddy, go easy, I'm with the press!' she protested, as she was roughly manhandled behind the police line. An officer was yelling through a bullhorn, ordering the crowd to disperse and to go home. Here, a few shell-shocked escapees stood at a safe distance, despite the occasional attempt to move them on. They watched in glassy-eyed disbelief.

The skirmish was still quite self-contained. Kathy stared at the tightly packed mass of undulating bodies, heard the cries of anger and wails of pain, and wondered how she had managed to extricate herself. Smoke billowed from the centre. A fire truck had arrived, and was trying to force its way towards the blaze at a painfully slow crawl.

Kathy dug her notebook and pencil out, but just stood and held them uselessly. She had never been good at taking notes under pressure.

At the far edge of the disturbance, a water cannon had been wheeled up. People fell as it blasted out its cold payload indiscriminately. The police were moving in, dragging the fallen clear one by one. But the crowd never seemed to thin.

Kathy noticed one thing, with interest. In all the crush and confusion, an area of some three feet or so around the church had been left completely clear.

Steven hated this. He knew, intellectually, that the riot could only rage on until the emotions of which it was born had been spent. He knew that he should concentrate his efforts on defence, and on getting himself away. He could do no good. But, everywhere he turned, an injustice demanded his attention. He found some small ways in which to help. He laid low a drunken lout, who had been lashing out at anyone within reach. He helped several people to their feet. And then he saw a policeman, losing control and striking a woman repeatedly with his baton. And Steven thought of Roylus Prime, and felt his blood rising.

He waded towards the bully, disarming him efficiently and delivering a blow to his solar plexus. It didn't send him down. The officer's face reddened with anger and exertion, and he braced himself against somebody else's broad back and launched himself at his attacker. He was thickset and muscular, and as the pair grappled, Steven realised that they were evenly matched.

They were torn apart by a fierce jet of water. It caught Steven in his side, hitting like a battering ram, almost driving him to the ground. Fists and feet struck from all sides, as if his collision with their owners had been his fault.

The policeman came at him again, but, in his fury, he left himself open to a solid punch to the jaw, fuelled by Steven's disgust. A moment later, Steven's arms were pinned to his sides and he realised that reinforcements had battled their way to him. He protested loudly as he was dragged from the crowd and towards a waiting police van. A hand grabbed his wrist, and he realised that one of his captors was trying to handcuff him.

'Oh no you don't,' he grunted, and began to fight back. A baton struck him across the backs of his legs, and he crumpled. He was hauled immediately to his feet, and the handcuffs loomed again.

Then a shaft of light illuminated the area, and everybody fell silent.

To Steven, it felt unreal that calm could so easily have overtaken such chaos. It occurred to him that he could seize this opportunity to flee, but he no longer wished to.

The sun had risen, under cover of a cloud that had now blown away. Its warmth and light had come suddenly, and were generously imparted. It was a benevolent, soothing presence.

A rainbow had formed. To Steven's recollection, it had not rained more than a few drops all night, and yet there it was, its colours perfect and sharply defined, almost twinkling in the light of the new day. From this perspective, it seemed that its arc disappeared through the roof of the church itself, so that its foot had to be inside.

Somebody had mounted the church steps.

He was a short man, but imposing for reasons that Steven could not have elucidated. He was of indeterminate age. When Steven looked at his face, he could almost imagine that he was an old man, but he had a younger, healthy body and the uncertain poise of a child. He wore a tasteful, almost majestic, ensemble of silver and leather, with a chain-link belt. He did not look remarkable. But he was. Steven felt it. He just did not know why.

Some muttering broke out around him. 'He's not one of the five,' one man observed.

'It doesn't matter. He *is* one of the gods. Don't ask me how, but I know it.'

The rest of the crowd were coming to the same conclusion. They were bowing their heads – in some cases, even kneeling despite the lack of space – crossing themselves and putting their hands together in prayer. They were weeping, and calling out their thanks to the stranger for heeding their pleas. He looked out across their upturned faces, and seemed baffled. Steven realised that he had taken six steps towards the church, drawn by an irrational longing. The gathering had contracted as others did the same. Nobody tried to stop them. The police and fire officers were as mesmerised as everybody else was.

The stranger did not speak a word. He turned and entered the church, and left a respectful peace in his wake. The fire had sputtered out, and people were beginning to take seats again, their vigil lent fresh purpose. The fire truck departed, and the police began to pack their weapons away.

'They've come back,' sobbed an elderly woman through tears of gratitude. Steven wondered what her life had to be like, that she needed a miracle so badly. 'Our gods have returned.'

Kathy had not intended to sleep. She had seen one riot sparked off in a matter of seconds, and she had no wish to be caught unawares by another. Besides, she had a story to

write up for the afternoon edition. But she had slept all the same, her caution – and her hopes – overridden by sheer fatigue.

When she woke, it took her a moment to clear her fuzzy head and to remember where she was. Her right ear was sore, her bundled-up coat having provided scant cushioning from the hard tarmac. Her neck ached from the lack of a decent pillow. Oddly, she was not cold. The sun had climbed higher into the sky, and the clouds had receded. It looked like being the finest day that New York had experienced this year.

The gods had returned, she thought, and all was well with the world.

Kathy tuned in to the low mutterings of voices around her. She heard nothing to suggest that there had been any developments. She rubbed her eyes, wished for a hot cup of coffee or at least that she had not drained her flask, and looked for Steven. She was pleased to see that he had not cut out on her, as she had half expected. He was still by her side, engaged in earnest conversation with a pleasant-looking young man with blond hair and a red jacket.

Kathy frowned and looked again, and narrowed her eyes.

It did not seem possible.

She tapped Steven on the shoulder. 'How about introducing me to your friend?'

'Oh, Kathy. Hi. This is, ah, Norman.'

'Norman as in "the God of Order", right? So you've all come back, then.'

'Kathy's a friend of mine,' Steven explained to Norman, almost apologetically.

'How can you be here?' asked Kathy. 'I mean, why aren't the crowd going ape? They've been waiting for you and your buddies all night. Don't they see you or something?'

'I believe I can pass for human,' said Norman.

'Well, yes, but... look, never mind that. Can I talk to you?'

'You desire information.'

'Kathy's a reporter,' warned Steven. Oh great, thought Kathy. Thanks a heap for that. 'She works for the *New York Ranger*.'

'I desire information too,' said Norman.

Kathy's stomach began to tingle with the familiar excited sensation that accompanied any major breakthrough in a story. She had been right to stick with Steven. Through him, she was about to land the scoop of her career. She could

imagine her father's face, when he found out. Not the issue, she told herself, it's not important. But she knew that was a lie.

'Then let's trade,' she said, trying to keep her eagerness in check. 'Shall we go somewhere more private? Olive's?'

Steven shrugged indifferently 'Why not?'

'I still don't understand what you want,' said Steven to Norman, as the trio picked their way through the mostly somnambulant crowd. 'Why come to me?'

'I sensed your presence amongst the others,' said Norman. 'We have met before, and I learned of your wisdom. You expressed some disapproval of my actions then.'

'I certainly did.'

'These people look to us for advice, for assistance, for salvation – and yet their desires are unclear and often contradictory in nature.'

'Huh,' snorted Kathy, keen to get in on the exchange. 'That's humanity for you.'

'Then I need to learn about humanity,' said Norman. 'I need to understand, before I can act.'

'I need your help.'

Chapter Eight

PREY FOR A MIRACLE

Fifteen years on from the New York aliens/gods scare, there are still questions to be answered. There is undoubtedly a need for a rational, methodical investigation into the events of 1965. This film, however, is not it.

Prey for a Miracle is simply too credulous. The director, newcomer Anthony Jones, has bought wholesale into notions of alien shape-changers and government conspiracies, treating the project as a B-movie rather than as the serious documentary it deserves to be. Part of the problem, of course, is that the screenplay is based on Alexander Lullington-Smythe's book How I Saved the World, which was very publicly discredited two years ago. The film was put on hold then. One cannot help but feel it should have stayed on the shelf.

A fair cast does its best with a script that veers from the turgid to the unbelievable. Of note is Peter Cushing's portrayal of the mysterious government adviser, Doctor Who. Alas, Cushing's endearingly eccentric professor is as fictional as the rest of Prey for a Miracle. From what little we know of the real-life 'Doctor', we can be sure that his was a shadowy, manipulative presence.

This should have been a film about the nature of belief and about how it can distort one's perceptions. The sad thing is, it will probably make this point, in that people will see it and believe. The truth has become one step more distant.

Films in Focus, November 1980

The sun peered into the valleys between the Catskill Mountains. Its light woke grey squirrels and sent them scurrying through beech trees. It roused the sparrows and bluejays to song. It crested the highest of the tall peaks and crept over the secluded buildings of Rogers Air Force Base. There, it dried the fresh dew on the grass and the fresh blood on the tarmac.

The light found Charles Marchant asleep at his desk, eyelids twitching, the occasional frightened denial spilling from his mouth as he dreamt of a world overrun.

It filtered through the grimy windows of the chapel and glistened in Byron Carter's tears as he searched his heart for a prayer and found it empty.

Acknowledging no barriers, the light prised apart the curtains over Stanley Emerson's window. It caressed him as he rocked back and forth on his bed and stared at peeling plaster, his mind numbed by shock and disbelief.

Dorothea Chaplet smiled as the light touched her. She had slept easily and deeply, and she rejoiced in the new melodies of the woodland around the base.

The light lingered on the slight form of the Doctor, as he enjoyed a stroll in the crisp morning air. He was fresh and alert, although he had barely slept. His thoughts were his own, but an observer might have concluded that he was pondering something deeply and making plans. At the appearance of the sun, he stopped and sighed and leaned heavily on his walking cane, as if his abstract problem had solidified.

A new day began.

Last night:

They had talked for hours, around a long oak table in a room with nicotine-stained walls. Dodo had told them about Joseph; about what had happened in London. It had been a relief to let the words out. She had felt embarrassed at having kept them inside for so long.

The Doctor had understood. He had clucked and scolded at first, but had made all the right sympathetic noises as the story had unfolded. He had even slipped an arm around Dodo's shoulders as she had reached the most difficult part of it. General Marchant had nodded grimly, as if Dodo had only confirmed his suspicions. The other men, a few junior officers and scientists, had listened politely. Dodo had recognised Professor Carter. She had looked at him often, saddened as her every word had only seemed to increase his dismay. She had wanted to take his hand and assure him that things weren't so bad really.

The Doctor had given her an encouraging nod when she had faltered at the part about his travelling machine. She had told the truth, and, though General Marchant had seemed

intensely interested, he had not asked any questions. Odd, really.

Later, the Doctor had told her that the general had been persuaded to place his suspicions aside. He needed the Doctor's help. Dodo had felt a thrill at being the trusted confidante of one so important. In her dreams, her new friend became a secret agent, an inventor for the government. He had long since resigned his post to pursue his own ambitions, but his expertise was much sought-after on occasions such as this.

In the conference room, last night, the Doctor had taken charge easily, clutching at his lapels and taking on the authoritative air of a teacher or professor. 'We have all seen the powers of these creatures, but their physical abilities are not the primary threat here, you mark my words. No, gentlemen, Miss Chaplet, these would-be gods hope to conquer this planet of, ah, ours without firing a shot.'

Hegemonic domination. Dodo mulled over the concept as she luxuriated in a much-needed bath. Could the aliens (that word still disturbed her: the revelation made sense, but in a weird kind of way, like the world was not the same place as it had been yesterday) really gain power just by convincing people that they deserved it? They hadn't swayed her with their claims, but then she had to admit that the Doctor's scepticism had had a lot to do with that. And she had seen how many people wanted to believe. How long before it became impossible to make a move against these self-proclaimed deities without driving followers to riot? How long before they became a powerful – and democratic – force in politics?

How long before they controlled the world?

General Marchant had proposed immediate action. The Doctor had reminded him that force had proved ineffective thus far. 'This is a war of ideologies,' he had said, 'and the only way to win such a thing is with words.' But he had agreed that something needed to be done.

Dodo couldn't wait to find out what.

Marchant picked his way across the battlefield of nightmare, testing each step lest rubble slip beneath his feet. Lodged into each crevasse, or just sprawled across the debris, were the husks of men cut down in the final, desperate effort. The sun was lost for ever behind roiling black clouds, and a thin green haze hung in the air Worse still

was the rank, acid taste of defeat on Marchant's tongue. His uniform was battered and holed. He had torn off his general's pips himself, deserving them no longer. He cried, for the first time since his first night at military academy. He sank to his knees as the tears were released in painful, wracking sobs.

The enemy came for him, at last, as he had come for so many others. Marchant was sickened to see that he wore the pristine uniform of an American soldier.

'Is this how you see your future?' asked the enemy.

Marchant did not look at him. His head was bowed in shame. 'It's what you want, isn't it? To humiliate me, slaughter my men, take my world?'

'This is your vision, Charles, not mine.'

Marchant looked up sharply. Since his father had passed away, the only people who had addressed him by his first name had been senior officers and, occasionally, his ex-wife. He wondered how this vile creature could have known it. He searched its face for an answer, but found nothing in the impossible shadows beneath the peak of its cap. He fought down an improper, embarrassing surge of terror. He had seen the enemy, and it was the faceless embodiment of all the soldiers who had died at General Marchant's command.

'What are you?' he whispered.

'I am called Dennis,' said the enemy, 'although, in other lives, I was Mars and Ares and Hachiman and Mont. I am your God of War.'

'You are not my god,' snarled Marchant through gritted teeth. 'I don't believe in you. I won't believe in you!'

'You have always worshipped at my altar, Charles, though you deny it now.'

'I know what you are! You've come here to –' Marchant swung a hand to encompass the devastation about him – 'to do this. To make war. You admit it!'

'It is not my intent to begin a war, Charles, nor to win one. I merely represent that aspect of humanity. I am the man who rails at an injustice and yearns to see it made right whatever the cost; the zealot who believes that personal glory can be found through combat; the patriot who knows that national pride and human freedom are causes worth bearing arms for. And I am the soldier who dies from a bullet wound in a foreign jungle for a cause he does not understand; the officer who marshals his troops to battle and tries not to think about how many will not survive; the grieving widow who learns

from an impersonal telegram that her husband has been lost. I am you, Charles Marchant. I am the boy who cowered beneath his sheets at the academy and swore that nobody would make him cry again; the adolescent who fought the bullies and won; the man who climbed the ranks with single-minded purpose; the officer who prepared a world for war and fears he did not make his preparations well enough. We have no reason to fight.'

Marchant's tears were flowing thick and fast now. 'What do you want of me?'

'Only to help. We would speak to you in person; allay your fears of us. We invite you to meet us at our church.'

'Alone?' Marchant laughed hollowly. 'Walk into your trap, you mean.'

'We number six now. You may bring five colleagues. We shall meet on equal terms.'

Equal? How could they be equal? Marchant was helpless against these creatures, and it was the worst feeling of his life. He was a child again, wanting only to pull the bedclothes around his head for what little protection they could give. He was facing bullies, who could do whatever they liked to him because they were stronger. He wanted to hide and only come out when somebody else had made them go away. But, now as then, nobody else would. His salvation had to lie in his own hands.

'I do not wish to fight you, Charles Marchant,' the enemy reiterated. 'There are enough wars on this world of yours to keep me occupied, believe me.'

And Marchant woke in his office, slumped across his desk, his eyes shamefully wet and the receding memories of the worst dream yet in his mind.

Along with the certainty that, this time, it had been more than a dream.

Joseph sat on a grey marble step, one hand idly stirring a gentle stream, which he knew instinctively to have been his own contribution to the restored interior of the church. 'It is done?' he asked.

'It is,' said Dennis. 'The men of war will come here.'

'Do you think they will listen to us?'

'If they will not, we shall destroy them.'

'How can we justify such an act?'

'It will be as they expect. We have a difference. If negotiation cannot overcome it, then war is the logical recourse. To the victor will go the argument.'

'But war is wrong, is it not?'

'If the humans think this, then why do they practise it so vigorously?'

'I asked that question too,' recalled Joseph. 'I am not certain of the answer.'

'There has always been a God of War,' said Dennis softly.

'Has there? I do not recall.' Joseph held his head in his hands and felt the familiar pain of confusion. 'Why are my thoughts so fragmented? You tell me we are gods to the people of Earth, and yet I know no such thing. Is it not wrong to set ourselves up above them, to judge them, to shape their destinies?' His gaze strayed to the window and its stained glass depiction of the Patriarch.

'It is their choice to make.' Joseph recognised the rich, booming tones. The all-father had manifested himself. He turned and prostrated himself at the Patriarch's sandalled feet. 'The humans make their own gods. If it were not for their deep desires, we could not exist.'

'Yes. Yes, I feel that. And yet there are those who would resist us.'

'Then we must convert them, for such is the will of the majority.'

'It is?'

The Patriarch's voice deepened and took on the tone of thunder. 'Can you not feel them, boy? They surround this church in vigil for our attentions. Open your mind and heart to their hopes, their longings, their prayers. Tell me then that they would wish us to leave this world. We cannot exist without them, it is true, but nor can they exist without us.'

And Joseph felt it.

He touched the mind of Sylvia Blake, ground down by a life of poverty, pregnant with a child she could not afford by a man whom she despised. Joseph knew he could help her; knew too that she regarded the gods as her last hope. He heard the thoughts of Mark Turner, abandoned by friends and family. He had contemplated suicide and was here on a final, desperate search for a reason to continue. Joseph emoted with Libby Daniels's concern for the animals that were being led to slaughter the world over.

He found so many ways in which he could help; so many people praying that he would do so.

'You see now, do you not?' asked the Patriarch, in a softer and kinder tone.

And Joseph nodded, unable to speak, as he wept bitterly for the misery of the human race.

Last night:

Harsh, white light had spilled into the cell. It had illuminated one side of the Doctor's face. He had been sitting on the edge of the simple bed, with a straight back, hands clasped atop the cane that had rested on the floor between his feet. As Marchant had marched in with his escort, he had had the unnerving impression that he was expected.

'I think you should know,' the general had said, 'your friend has been defeated.'

'I doubt that. I doubt that very much. And, for your information, sir, that being was no friend of mine.'

'Don't lie to me, Doctor. Remember, I know your secret.'

'Oh, and you think all aliens are the same, do you? We all come from Mars and have nothing better to do than plot invasion attempts and cause trouble for your intelligence services? Look at me, General Marchant. Do I look like a Tzun or a Dalek? And, if I had the capabilities of the being you just fought, do you think I would be your prisoner?'

'You expect me to believe it's just a coincidence, that you turn up at the same time and in the same place as those things?'

'Perhaps I am here to help you resist them.'

'What makes you think I need your help? The Pentagon itself is waiting on my word. If necessary, I will have the combined forces of the entire United States at my disposal.'

'Then you will lead them into defeat! You have seen what your enemy can do. What you must do now is find out how and, more importantly, why.'

'Suppose you tell me?'

'I can't. Not yet.'

General Marchant had left then, conscious of his prisoner's eyes on his back. When he had returned to the guardhouse, after an hour's frenetic pacing, the Doctor's position had not changed. He had still been waiting. Still expecting. Marchant had almost turned and walked back out of the cell. In all of his career, he had not had to ask this

question before. He had had confidence in his own judgement. He had never imagined himself so useless. Battered into submission, fighting to the last drop of his blood, yes. But not useless. Not having to ask this.

‘What do I do?’

‘We cannot fight them by conventional means,’ said the Doctor, leaning forward in his chair in Marchant’s office and regarding the general over the tips of his steepled fingers. ‘That is, unless you are prepared to explode a bomb in downtown Manhattan, and even then you might not succeed. No, no, the key to this problem is diplomacy.’

‘So you keep saying,’ Marchant grunted. ‘But when these creatures refuse to get the hell off my world because you’ve given them a stern lecture, what then?’

‘Then we take what we have learned of them and we use it to defeat them.’

A smile tugged at the corner of Marchant’s mouth, but he fought not to show it. He cast his mind back to the dream, and the smile was dissolved in a hot sweat of fear and uncertainty ‘You know a way?’

‘Not yet, but I am working on it.’

‘What if we were to return to the church? To talk, this time?’

‘The church does seem to be something of a focal point,’ the Doctor agreed. ‘If the gods are not still there —’

‘Don’t call them that!’ Marchant interrupted.

‘Very well, very well. But you must realise, sir, that that is how a good number of people do see them. It is one of their greatest strengths.’

Marchant scowled. ‘What if,’ he asked tentatively, ‘we were to go there now? This morning? Just a small detail. You and me at its head.’

The Doctor’s eyes narrowed. Marchant scratched under his collar and felt as if the old man was peering into his mind. Damn him, how could he make him sweat like this? It wasn’t as if his plan was illogical. It made sense. It was the right thing to do, and some stupid dream didn’t come into it. No goddamned alien would make him feel as if it did.

‘Yes,’ said the Doctor, finally, drawing out the word and nodding slowly. ‘Yes, I think that may be the best way to proceed.’

Joseph embraced the memory of life without pain.

He allowed the incense scent, the trickling of water and the firm but reassuring presence of the Patriarch's hand on his head to lull him back to a better time. He wondered how he could have forgotten it.

He had been happy, then, and carefree. No troublesome thoughts of his own. There was a pleasant sensation of drifting; just casting himself free from gravity's chains and soaring in whatever direction took his primitive fancy. Joseph longed to return to that existence, but felt a pang of fear at the notion of surrendering his hard-built identity.

He remembered the companionship of others; the joining of his group, as it and one other had ventured into the black void beyond their home. An innocent whim. But Joseph's next memory was of pain. The tumultuous patterns of a billion minds had stabbed into him; had made him suffer a rude awakening of consciousness.

He had been unable to resist the siren call of a world in need.

Descending into fire, his group had lost coherence.

Joseph had woken, amongst the dead, on grassland in the conurbation known as London.

'I remember now,' he whispered.

'You recall as much as we ever can from the time beyond this life,' said the Patriarch.

'The humans called to us.'

'They created us.'

'They need us.'

'We are their gods.'

'I see that now.'

'It was only hidden from you through the circumstance of your arrival,' said the Patriarch. 'It was unfortunate indeed that our groups became separated; that yours lost control.'

'And we were truly Mankind's gods in the time beyond?'

'It is possible. The humans wish it so. For now, that is enough.'

'Aunt Margaret? It's Dorothea.

'Yes, yes, I know. I'm sorry, I didn't –

'You called the police? Aunt Margaret, there was no need.

'Well, yes, I suppose I was in trouble in a way, but I'm all right now. Really.

'I'm in New York.

'I know. Look, Aunt Margaret, I can't talk long, we have to keep this line free. And I can't tell you everything. But I will, soon. I'm with –

'A passport? Well, no. It's all right though, I'm with the American Army.

'But I've only missed a few days of school, and I'll be back soon.

'Yes, I suppose it is about the other night; the green lights and all.

'Oh, Aunt Margaret, I am sixteen, you know. And no, I can't get the general to come to the phone. They're treating me fine, Aunt Margaret, honest they are.

'No, I couldn't call you before now I wasn't with the army then. It's a long story.

'Look, Aunt Margaret, I really do have to go. But don't worry about me, please. I'm happy. I'm doing what I've always wanted. It's an adventure. Please, let me do this.

'Oh, Aunt Margaret, of course I'll be back for my exams.'

'It is magnificent, isn't it?'

Carter had been standing alone in the cold hangar, lost in thought. He had not heard the old alien man enter. He jumped, startled, and backed away instinctively. The Doctor didn't appear to notice. He stepped up to the egg-shaped shell of the damaged spaceship and laid a hand upon it, almost reverentially.

'This artefact, Professor Carter, was grown on another world, beneath a different sun.' His face was a picture of childish delight. 'First contact with an alien race. Oh, I envy you, Professor Carter. You are taking the first step on a grand voyage of discovery. A grand voyage, yes.' He swung around to face Carter, and pointed his walking cane directly at him. 'So what precisely are you afraid of, hmm?'

Carter was incredulous. He stuttered for a moment, before forcing out an answer: 'That thing last night tried to kill me!'

'And?'

'We're at war, aren't we?'

'Yes, yes, there are some evil creatures in this universe, and they must be fought. But how can we fight them without knowledge, hmm?' The Doctor spoke passionately. 'Knowledge, my friend. To be afraid of that is a terrible thing indeed, don't you think?'

'We can know too much.'

‘Oh, can we indeed? There are people who would disagree with you.’

‘What about faith?’

‘Ah, I see. You’re wondering how you can believe in a God and a Heaven and a Bible that speaks of one world and race alone when there are so many more out there.’

‘Yes!’ cried Carter, embarrassed by the anguish that sounded clear in his voice.

‘You can learn about them,’ insisted the Doctor. ‘You can open your mind to the miracles, not just of one world, but of a universe. You can believe that, if your God can fashion an infinite number of snowflakes and still make each one unique, then he can also create a beautiful life form on a dead rock circling a distant star. Expand your faith, man, or you will remain blind to so much that is beautiful.’

He waited for a few seconds, as if for an answer. When none was forthcoming, he turned back to the spaceship and inspected it, squinting myopically as he ran his hands over its surface. ‘I wonder...’ he muttered happily to himself.

‘Do they – do they believe in God on other planets?’ Carter asked awkwardly.

‘They have beliefs. They might differ from your own, as do those of many people on your own world, but they offer the same comfort.’

Carter nodded, still trying to take in what the Doctor had said. Once again, he had the unsettling feeling that the world was moving too fast beneath him. He did not know what to think, what to feel, what to believe.

But, at last, he did know what he should do.

‘I demand to know why I’m being kept here!’

General Marchant sprang to his feet. ‘Mr Lullington-Smythe, I’ll thank you not to come barging into my office!’

‘I was held under armed guard all night,’ Smythe complained. ‘Now one of your fascist bully boys tells me I can’t go home with the others.’

‘Correct. I haven’t finished with you yet, mister.’

‘What do you want?’

‘I will be visiting these friends of yours shortly.’

‘The gods?’

‘The creatures. Once I have heard their story –’

‘Take me with you!’

‘What?’

'You're going to talk to the gods, right? I know them. I've worked with them. They'll talk to me. I can help you.'

'I've no reason to trust you. You've told me nothing.'

'I've told you everything I know, I swear it.'

'Then, Mr Lullington-Smythe, you don't know very much, do you?'

'You can't do this to me. I have an investment to protect. My clients will be expecting me.'

Marchant bristled. 'I am dealing with more important issues than your profit margins!'

'I'll go to the government. I'll go to your superiors. Who do you report to?'

'Are you threatening me, mister?'

Smythe forced himself to calm down. He spread out his hands in a placatory gesture. 'Look, we've seen what these... creatures can do. A familiar face on your team can't hurt.'

Marchant thought about it, then nodded abruptly. 'All right, I'll take a chance on you.'

Of course, there followed the predictable warnings of what would happen if Smythe failed to obey the general's orders. Smythe did not care. The important thing was that he would see his clients again, hopefully before some unscrupulous microbe lured them away.

He didn't know what the gods were. He didn't know what they wanted. But they were still the biggest, and potentially the most lucrative, thing that had happened to him in his life.

Joseph almost laughed for joy. Yesterday, he had been alone. Now he had found a family and they were prepared to accept him.

Max and Jennifer had joined Dennis at his side. Norman, it seemed, had left on a mission to preserve order, but the Patriarch assured Joseph that his spirit was with them.

Though he remained on his knees, Joseph felt his head lifted so that he looked into the Patriarch's radiant features. A beautiful light shone through the stained glass window at the all-father's back, and created a corona around him. Joseph had the fleeting impression that the Patriarch was striding out of the sun itself, carrying with him the seeds of life. He thought he could hear a fanfare, although his ears could not detect it.

'Of all of our pantheon, you, its sixth member, have suffered the most troubled genesis,' announced the

Patriarch. 'You have felt the cruelty of those who would rail, unthinkingly, against that which they most want and need. And yet you have also felt the love of those who would see you take your rightful place amongst us. You know that, in all things, love must ever hold sway. Those who have greeted us with hatred must be made to recognise their error. There are many on this world who would see harsh judgement meted out to them. They yearn to be freed from the scourge of the greedy, the selfish and the disbelieving; all of who would do harm to their fellow man. Thus, I name you Damien, and proclaim that you shall be our God of Vengeance. Welcome, Damien.'

'No.'

Joseph spoke quietly, and yet the single syllable cut through the atmosphere as if he had screamed it in the Patriarch's face. The all-father frowned, and, with his displeasure, his light took on a hint of fiery red. 'You would defy me in this, boy? You have spent too long, perhaps, with the faithless.'

'I beg your forgiveness, Father, but it is true that my experiences on this world have differed from your own. I would dearly love to become a part of your family – but I have already been given a name, and, I believe, a purpose here.'

The Patriarch raised an ominous eyebrow.

'I am Joseph, and, by your leave, I would be your God of Peace.'

Stan stood rigidly to attention, pressing his thumbs down hard on the seams of his trousers to keep his arms straight and his shoulders from trembling. He only took in half of what General Marchant was saying. Half was enough.

'The creature spared your life, Emerson. Granted, you don't know why, but somehow you must have touched something in it. I might be able to use that.'

Marchant paused, and Stan filled in automatically: 'Sir.'

'You will join the church detail, as my driver and personal escort.'

'Sir.'

'Report for briefing in twenty minutes. And, Private, return your weapon to the armoury.'

'Sir?'

'The only thing on the agenda today is talking – at least, in the first instance.'

‘But how can –?’ Stan thought better of questioning the general, but too late. Marchant’s piercing green eyes were upon him. ‘I mean, do you think talking will help, sir?’

‘It’s our last option before wheeling out the big guns, Emerson. These creatures want to convince us they should rule this world. They need to be told that we’re not about to roll over and let them. If they know what’s good for them, they’ll pack their little green tails between their little green legs and fly back to Mars!’ He thought for a second, then added lamely: ‘Or wherever.’

‘But,’ Stan blurted out, ‘what if they’re telling the truth?’

Marchant’s jaw tightened. His nostrils flared. Stan had pushed it too far.

‘It’s just,’ he stammered, ‘on the runway, the thing that attacked us – what else was it, if not the vengeance of God?’

Running dry of words, Stan braced himself for the general’s inevitable fury. It did not come. Marchant leaned against his desk and deflated a little, seeming tired. ‘Twenty minutes, Private,’ he reiterated.

‘Sir!’ Stan saluted and performed a smart about-turn. As he reached for the door, Marchant recovered some of his fire.

‘That creature killed fourteen men, Private,’ he snapped. ‘Keep that in mind.’

Stan fairly ran through the empty secretary’s office beyond the general’s, and out into the morning sunshine. The base was silent, and the silence seemed oppressive. It closed in around Stan and made him feel isolated and lonely.

Why him? Why had fate chosen him to pluck from the pack? From the safety of his friends and colleagues; from people whose lead he could follow?

His hands shook now, uncontrollably. He found himself offering a small, voiceless prayer to God, in case he might take offence at what Stan was about to do.

He did not know how he would survive the next few hours.

Midday found Dodo perched on the bench in the rear of the truck again. This time, she was not in handcuffs. This time, she was part of a task force assembled by the army to deal with a grave threat to international security. She ought to have been pinching herself, she thought, to be sure this was real. She only regretted that she had not had the chance to change her old clothes (perhaps she should have accepted that offer of coveralls, after all).

She had eavesdropped on a conversation between the Doctor and General Marchant. The former had wanted Dodo to remain at the base. She couldn't blame him, really. He was concerned about her. Anyway, the general had shouted him down. 'At least one of these creatures has an affinity with Miss Chaplet,' he had said. 'Her presence could be the one thing that keeps us alive in there. Believe me, Doctor, I am as reluctant as you are to drag a young girl into this – but I have no choice.'

Just let them try stopping me, she had thought.

The Doctor had remained by Dodo's side ever since, placing a protective arm around her occasionally, asking how she felt and glaring hawkishly at anyone who came too close. It was quite sweet, really.

The general rode in the front of the truck with his driver, a Private Emerson. In the back, with Dodo and the Doctor, were Professor Carter and Lullington-Smythe. Marchant had wanted a scientist with him, and had seemed surprised when Carter had volunteered. Dodo had caught the Doctor's nod in the general's direction, just before he had accepted the offer. As for Smythe, Dodo had formed the impression that Marchant wanted him along to keep an eye on him, rather than because he might have a contribution to make.

Eight vehicles were making the trip from Rogers AFB to downtown Manhattan and the church in SoHo. Seven of them would stop some blocks away, their occupants on standby. Upon the heads of the six people in this vehicle would rest the fate of the whole world.

The situation was serious.

Dodo wondered if it was quite proper for her to feel so excited.

Chapter Nine

STAR STRUCK

Heard the latest from across the Atlantic? Americans are flocking to New York, to see six men who claim to be the Gods of Myth come to Earth in a spaceship.

How can they be so gullible?

Some people, it seems, will believe anything.

The Bulldog (editorial), Sunday March 28, 1965

Dodo saw little of the journey into the city. The only windows were those in the back doors of the truck, and she became tired of peering through their bars at receding stretches of road and at the convoy of vehicles behind her. She knew, though, when they had reached the church. She knew it because the truck's progress slowed to a crawl and because she could no longer see the rest of the convoy, but mostly because a crush of people had appeared at the windows. Unhappy people. They shouted and cursed and hammered on the doors and on the side of the truck with fists and sticks. Dodo was horrified to find herself at the focal point of such hatred. She realised that the army were blamed for having driven the gods away once. Nobody wanted it to happen again.

The hatred seemed to go on for ever, but the truck finally juddered to a halt. Several more minutes passed before General Marchant appeared through the bars and unlocked the doors. The Doctor climbed out first, making sure that Dodo was safely behind him. People were shouting and screaming, but no violence had broken out. Yet.

Marchant was jostled. He responded indignantly, threatening arrests. The Doctor raised his voice to assure everybody that the group was here at the gods' invitation. 'I am right, am I not, General?' he asked pointedly. Marchant glared at him, and seemed startled and guilty.

Dodo saw now why it had taken so long for the truck to plough through the crowd. Since last she had seen it, it had grown enormous. From here, she could not see its edges.

The Doctor's words had calmed things – but still the short trek to the church door, with Marchant and the Doctor before her and Smythe, Carter and Emerson behind, was an interminable struggle.

They left the crowd behind as they mounted the steps. The guards had taken up their positions again, but they parted to allow the delegation through. Dodo remembered what the Doctor had said. They had been invited here? How could it be so?

Inside, the church was more beautiful than she remembered. A stream flowed across one corner, and sunlight danced on its surface. Dodo caught herself smiling.

The gods awaited them.

They formed a line atop the step to the altar: Jennifer, Max, Dennis, and, to Dodo's delight (although the emotion surprised her), Joseph. A short way behind, the Patriarch sat upon another new addition to the building: an elevated throne, with royal blue velvet cushions. One god was missing. Dodo could not recall his name.

No words were exchanged. Marchant strode briskly up the central aisle, and the rest of the group straggled along in his wake. The general halted smartly, some ten feet from the lesser gods. The others stopped behind him. Private Emerson removed his beret respectfully. Then, seeing that Marchant's cap remained defiantly in place, he fumbled with it for a moment and replaced it awkwardly. The Doctor gave Dodo a disapproving glance as she shuffled to his side, despite his best efforts to keep her back. Professor Carter was attentive and tight-lipped. Smythe sat in the pews, four rows back, conspicuously distancing himself from proceedings.

'Welcome,' said the Patriarch, 'to the Church of the Latter-Day Pantheon.'

The breaking of day had done little to brighten Olive's Diner. As life passed by its windows, the atmosphere within was subdued and hopeless. Olive had handed the counter to a teenaged boy, who communicated with unshaven patrons in monosyllabic grunts. The radio still blared out interference, but the bluebottle on the light fitting was dead.

Steven felt his spirits sapped by the place. He began to wonder what he was doing here, and what this was all for. 'I still don't see what you want,' he said in exasperation.

'Can you not feel the desperation?' asked Norman. 'It is all around us. It calls to us.'

'You keep saying you're here to help,' said Kathy, her notebook open and empty on the table whilst her pencil hung uselessly between her fingers. 'So, what's in it for you?'

'We wish to end the desperation; the need.'

'That's all?' asked Steven.

'Do you not wish the same?'

'Yeah. Well,' said Kathy, 'it's not so easy, is it?'

'We have the ability.'

Kathy leaned forward in her seat. 'Who are you?'

'We are your gods.'

'No, I mean really, who are you? Where do you come from?'

Norman spread his hands in consternation. 'I do not understand the reason for your cynicism.' He turned to Steven. 'It is equally strong in your mind.'

'I'm a realist, that's all,' Steven protested.

'No. Your experiences of life have taught you to seek out the worst in each person and situation. It is sad. You are two of a kind.'

Automatically Steven looked at Kathy. Their gazes met, and Steven suffered the fear that Norman could be right. He would have described the reporter as cynical, hard-bitten, thick-skinned – all the usual clichés. He had not thought of himself in the same terms. But what was so different about him?

'Now hold on a minute –'

'It is not my intention to criticise. There are many more like you. It is my hope that you can be taught to accept us. To trust.'

'You. You summoned me here, didn't you?' Marchant stared at the man from his dream, and lost his vaunted composure. 'You entered my mind. What gave you the right?'

Dennis, the God of War, spoke dispassionately. 'You prayed for me to come to you.'

'I did no such thing. I told you before, I don't believe in you!'

'Then why accede to my wish? Why come here, Charles Marchant?'

'Because I am responsible for the defence of this world!'

'We do not threaten your world.'

'Your comrade attacked my base. You're making these claims of yours, causing unrest.'

'We claim only what is true. You believe, Charles, although you deny it to yourself.'

'I –' Marchant began, but he had no words to say.

'Why else,' asked Dennis, 'would you be here?'

'I am here,' growled Marchant, 'to expose your charade for what it is.'

'Show us proof,' implored Steven, 'and we will trust you.'

'We have manifested ourselves on your plane,' said Norman. 'What more do you require?'

'More than that.'

'You have seen what I can do.'

'Any number of races have those sorts of powers.'

'What do you expect me to show you?'

'A miracle,' cut in Kathy. A down-to-earth approach was required here, she thought. Cut through the bull. She pushed her cup of coffee across the table, to beneath Norman's nose. 'Here. It's not water, but it'll do. How about some wine, then?'

'You do not expect me to perform such a task.'

'No, I don't. But I'll be impressed if you do.'

'And your friend will dismiss the act as a psychokinetic manipulation of the molecules of the liquid.'

Kathy grinned wryly at Steven. 'You wouldn't do that, would you?'

'You can't do it, can you?' Steven challenged.

'Not if you don't believe I can.'

'And how are we supposed to believe it if you don't show us?'

'That is, I believe, the enduring dichotomy of faith.'

'You. Byron Carter.'

Carter almost backed away, so alarmed was he at being singled out by the Patriarch.

'How can you deny us? You have spent many hours praying to become closer to us. Is our reality too horrifying for you to accept? Is it not what you have believed in all your life?'

Carter glanced around nervously. Everybody was watching him. The Doctor smiled and gave him an encouraging nod. Carter found some comfort in that, and the

will to seek out the knowledge he most fervently desired. He stepped forward until he was level with Marchant. He cleared his throat, and his voice drew in strength and volume as he spoke. 'Are you claiming to be our creators? Is that what you are saying?'

'In a sense,' said the Patriarch, 'it is you who created us.'

'Is that so? Well, it's a legitimate point of view, of course: Mankind creating its own gods, indeed. Some might say incompatible, though, with your physical presence here.'

'You know of a saying. You ask which came first.'

'The chicken or the egg. You are saying that, in essence, reality is circular?'

'Our origins are shrouded in time long past. Even we cannot be sure of them. Who can know how the symbiotic state of our races came to be?'

'Symbiotic?'

'Yes, Byron Carter, I would use so strong a word. Mankind cannot exist without its gods. Look around you, at a world that has been deprived of our presence overlong. You will see much to prove the fact.'

'And can you exist without us?'

'You lend us purpose,' said Joseph. Carter was startled by his interruption. He saw a momentary image of the sixth god's face, twisted in rage, as he bore down upon him, prepared to deliver a killing blow. The image was quelled by the vulnerable tone in Joseph's voice. 'Without you, we lack direction. Without your prayers, we do not know how to act.'

Flustered, Carter spilled out the most important question. 'But you can't claim to be God. Not the one true God! How can you? Any of you?'

'Are there not myriad facets to your God?' asked the Patriarch.

'But you're telling me that the church, the Holy Bible itself, was built around the legends of a... of a *race of aliens!*'

'You still think in the parochial terms of your own experience. You are a wise enough man to know that, even on this world of yours, the range of beliefs is vast. Are you so arrogant as to assume that the precise teachings of your own particular faith must be literally true?'

'This very day,' said Dennis, 'traditionalists in your church have condemned the reforms in its liturgy. How many such conflicts, how many full-scale wars, have religious differences at their root? You have considered this a cause for shame.'

'Is it so hard for you to open your heart to us?' asked Jennifer.

'Does our reality conflict so greatly with your expectations?' asked Dennis. 'Can you not see that it is but a question of interpretation?'

'You, Byron Carter,' the Patriarch rumbled, 'have believed for a lifetime without proof. Is it so hard to believe now that proof exists?'

'It is not necessary for you to accept our divinity,' said Norman.

'That's big of you,' Steven snorted.

'You have only to open your mind to what we can do for you.'

'By taking control of our world, you mean?'

'You have been a victim of crime and war. Do you not wish to see them eliminated?'

'How would you do that?' asked Kathy.

'By the consent of the people.'

'That's all well and good,' said Steven, 'but what about the ones who won't listen to you? The ones who want to fight and rob and kill?'

'You misunderstand. The consent of the people will enable us to act.'

'As you did last night?'

'I cannot be blamed if your desires are contradictory.'

'Oh, can't you?'

'Why resist us, Steven Taylor? We share the same objectives.'

'Some of you believe a world under our rule to be a bad thing,' said the Patriarch. 'We can disabuse you of this notion.'

'Like hell,' Marchant muttered under his breath.

Dodo stifled a gasp. So the gods really did want to conquer the world. They admitted it.

'We can do much that is good. We can make Earth a better place. Everybody would benefit. You all want something, and we can provide it.'

'And supposing Mankind does not wish to be ruled by you, hmm?' The Doctor had been silent until now, watching through narrowed eyes that glistened alertly.

'Damn straight,' agreed Marchant. 'You're in the Land of the Free now. It's been almost two centuries since we bent the knee to anyone.'

'It is not our intention to seize power by force,' said Joseph softly. Dodo felt as if his words were aimed at her, in response to her unvoiced doubt. 'It is simply inevitable that we should come to power, because such is the will of our subjects.'

'We're nobody's "subjects", mister,' Marchant snapped.

'You have seen the future, Steven Taylor. You were born there. Is it better?'

Kathy dropped her pencil. 'Hey, what are you saying?'

'It has its faults,' Steven confessed grudgingly. He thought of Roylus Prime and Mechanus and the Daleks; the pollution and famine and war and disease much closer to home.

'You're going along with this? Come on, you two, you're yanking my chain now!'

'We can change that. You and me, and everybody else who believes.'

'No. This is my past. It's history.'

'Forget your history. You'll be writing a new one.'

'Is that possible?'

'Hello?' said Kathy. 'BS alert! What are you two talking about?'

'Anything is possible. We need you, Steven. We have great powers, but we cannot see what is to come. You have seen. You must guide us through the future. Tell me, Steven: it is 1965 in the United States of America. What must we avoid? What can you do?'

Steven allowed himself to be swept along by Norman's enthusiasm. He had had this debate with himself so many times; it was refreshing to hear another opinion. He searched his memory, trying to call long-forgotten history disks to mind. 'Well, there's the Kennedy assassination, I suppose.'

'Er, yeah,' Kathy interjected. 'Already happened, actually.'

'Both of them?'

Kathy looked at him searchingly. Her expression suggested that she thought him insane but wasn't entirely sure. He ought to explain.

Norman spoke, before he could. 'Think of the difference even one man could make. You could save Robert Kennedy, Steven. A warning in the right ear, a well-timed call to the

police – a push in the right direction. I am talking about making that push, on a grand scale.'

'It's impossible!'

'Why? What is there to stop you?'

'The Doctor, for a start. We'd be eliminating my future.'

'We would be making it a happier one. Is the Doctor always right?'

'Usually, yes.'

'Did the Doctor not kill Anne Chaplet?'

What was the general's problem?

So far as Stan could see, he was being obdurate for the sake of it. Coming out with clichés about the corrupting effects of power, and why? General Marchant had power, didn't he? He had told, not asked, Stan to put his life in peril by coming here. Somebody had to be in control. Somebody had to take decisions, for the good of all. Perhaps Marchant resented the idea of it being somebody else. Somebody better.

Stan had missed the comfort of home and childhood and mother. He had joined the army in the belief that it would make decisions for him; provide him with guidance. Instead, it had made him more nervous than ever about doing the wrong thing and winding up in trouble.

The gods knew what to do. They would make everything clear.

Stan only had to do as he was told.

Dodo saw the appealing logic of the gods' plan.

So an enlightened alien race sees the state we're in, and decides to help. It's only like when the British government intervenes in foreign affairs, isn't it? It's only like what the Americans are doing in Vietnam, but without the bloodshed.

Dodo thought of a world in which no injustice could occur. A group of impartial arbiters, with the power to back up their words, could straighten out anything, intervene in any dispute. World peace was no longer a dream.

Imagine, a world without nuclear bombs.

She wondered what the Doctor thought. Did it matter? Surely he could not disagree.

Dodo's world was in a mess. So what was wrong with accepting a helping hand?

Steven could help. He could become the architect of a new future; single-handedly responsible for correcting the biggest failures of history. He could almost hear the Doctor's voice in his head, disapproving, warning of dire consequences, but what did he know really?

Steven was already in the past, and this was happening. The gods were here, and their plans would proceed with or without him. He could not stop them if he wanted to.

More: he had heard nothing of these events, in his own time. Perhaps history had been changed already. Perhaps time had done a right-turn, on to a new and better course. Perhaps it was his responsibility, his destiny, to guide it along that course. Perhaps he had been brought here for a purpose.

Steven thought of an Earth prepared for the Daleks' invasion. He thought of a race so enlightened and advanced that the uprising on Roylus Prime would never have to occur.

He saw the opportunity for which he had waited a lifetime.

Oh boy, thought Alexander Lullington-Smythe, they can actually pull this off. I am going to be so, so rich.

'I am afraid you are very much misguided,' said the Doctor. 'Even if we believe your intentions to be good, we cannot countenance this sort of interference. The human race must be allowed to develop at its own pace.'

Dodo was disappointed. For a second, Utopia had seemed a possibility. But she trusted the Doctor. Didn't she? What was his problem, anyway?

'You accuse us of interference?' boomed the Patriarch. 'You, who have interfered on more worlds and in more times than any of your people?'

'We all have a duty to fight evil,' the Doctor barked.

'And fight it we shall.'

'No. It is not evil that you propose to fight. You speak of charting the course of human history; of seizing control of an intelligent race and moulding it to your own whims.'

'For the better.'

'It is an unconscionable idea! You cannot – cannot –'

'It is what the humans desire. It is you who act against their wishes.'

'For their own good,' the Doctor spluttered.

The Patriarch stood, and the church grew dark. A chill settled around Dodo's shoulders, and she was mesmerised.

The Patriarch was still some yards away, but he seemed taller and more imposing than before. The Doctor had angered him.

'You claim to know what is good? You, who championed the people of Greece, and yet left those of France to be massacred? You, who burnt Rome and yet sabotaged your friend's attempt to save the Aztec race? You, who cold-bloodedly arranged for Rebecca Nurse to die, and dragged Katarina into a conflict she could neither understand nor survive?'

Dodo was beginning to feel lost. The Patriarch's accusations had come in such a barrage that the details had passed her by. She could only shake her head and wonder again who her new friend actually was. She was seeing him in a new light now: a less flattering light. His attempts to interrupt the Patriarch had been half-hearted and unsuccessful. He was losing the argument, and he knew it.

'I only try to do what is right,' he insisted.

'You are a hypocrite, Doctor. You would censure us for doing what you have striven all your life to do. And you are conceited, to think we could not do it better.'

'You are not perfect,' bellowed the Doctor, finding another rebellious streak within him. 'Your outburst proves that, sir! You are planning to manipulate lives, countries, time itself, on a grand scale. Nobody should have such power. Nobody is responsible enough.'

The Patriarch shook his head sadly. 'Why do you expect the worst of us?'

'Because I have met your kind before. Beings who hunger for power. I know that one planet would never be enough for your appetites!'

'We have come here,' said the Patriarch, with infinite patience, 'to help.'

'You can spread the word,' said Norman. 'So far, we have reached only a small proportion of your populace. The more people believe in us, the more good we can do. Your newspaper could be a useful tool.'

'Yeah,' said Kathy, 'I'll be writing about your lot all right.' She thought for a second, and frowned. 'Hold on, though, I don't want to look like a nut!'

'You will be the herald of a new age, renowned as a seeker of truth.'

I suppose I will, she thought. A Pulitzer was in the bag. It could be worth a certain amount of ridicule, in the early days. If Norman's plans came off, that was. And why shouldn't they?

Hey, listen to me, would you? What am I pinning my hopes on this jerk for?

'Indeed, we can use your skills in the long term. Communication is essential for the maintenance of order. We would remove the excesses of your tabloid press, and the secrecy of your governmental institutions.'

'You'd tell us everything?' asked Kathy. 'Without the bull?'

'Knowledge would be your right.'

'Flying saucers?'

'You would know all you wish to know about your father's business.'

'That's not what I meant.'

Norman smiled Kathy blushed, and glanced at Steven to be sure he had not seen. She was uncomfortable around Norman – he made her feel so transparent – but she could not resist the lure of what he offered.

'What,' she asked tentatively, 'can you tell me so far?'

Carter wondered why the Doctor had argued so fiercely. Was it not the Doctor who had told him to open his mind? To seek out the truth? The Patriarch had given him the truth. Of course, there was no proof of the gods' divine status, but then Carter had believed without proof for most of his life; had had that beaten into him at school.

The Patriarch's claims made sense.

Carter had been afraid, and now was ashamed of it. Had his faith been so easily shaken that he had feared it might be destroyed by reality? It had not been. Re-ordered, perhaps. Some of his definitions had changed. But, at the core, his beliefs remained intact.

The ineffable mystery of God – of the gods, rather – had been lessened, a little. Carter knew something of their origins. It should strengthen his faith, not weaken it.

Though the situation was tense, he smiled with relief. He could cope with anything now. He would not be bullied by the Marchants; neither Kathy nor the general. He did not need to bend to military control.

Byron Carter had rediscovered his reason for being.

Kathy felt the secrets of the universe at her fingertips. She only had to reach out to them. She could reveal things that her father would have kept from everybody. But would it be the right thing to do, or merely an act of spite on her part?

She hesitated, questioning her motives, but envisaged herself breaking the ultimate news story and doing the ultimate good deed at the same time. She believed Norman's claims, although she could not explain why. She had been given a chance to change the world, and surely that was more important than any childish vendetta.

Why worry about it, anyhow, when she could do both at once?

Wasn't it logical?

There were things out there: evil creatures, festering in the dark, their malevolent eyes ever turned upon this world. The gods could protect it. The war that Marchant most dreaded would not be waged. The general would be in charge of planetary defence – Dennis had promised him that – and he would have the information and resources to do the job as it ought to be done, at last. To make Earth safe.

He had been wrong. He had equated the gods with the bullies of his childhood, when in fact they were the adults in charge, with the power to put things right and, in this case, the will. Many times, as a child, he had prayed for intervention of their kind.

Divine intervention.

It was wrong. It went against everything for which Marchant stood. And the fact that it felt so right was even more wrong. Somewhere inside him, an angry boy screamed in rage and frustration, and Marchant felt a sense of detachment as he looked at his own thoughts from without and concluded that they were no longer his own.

Mind control.

No slimy alien would control *him*.

Marchant had come to the meeting prepared, unsure at the time if it was a good idea. The weight of the revolver in its concealed shoulder holster reminded him that he still had power. He willed his hand to reach for it. He almost dropped the weapon, so inappropriate – so wrong – did his action seem. An effect of the Patriarch's brainwashing. It had to be resisted. All would be clear again soon, and he would have done the right thing.

Marchant's training took over and, in painful slow motion as if in a dream, he levelled the gun, flicked off the safety catch and squeezed the trigger.

The retort echoed like a thunderclap off the vaulted ceiling Marchant was distantly aware of the Patriarch, staggering back and collapsing into his throne, one hand to his chest in a futile attempt to stem an explosion of blood.

Marchant felt a moment of grim satisfaction. The creatures could be hurt, after all.

The spell was broken.

'Your armed forces,' said Norman, 'have become paranoid to the point of obsession. They cannot cope with the possibility of a superior force about which they know little. Visitors to your world are subjected to all manner of cruelties, in the name of intelligence gathering – and yet the facts are kept from you, lest they bring about a loss of confidence.'

The gods were under attack.

Caught unawares, they were left in disarray as Marchant fired two more shots and yelled at Emerson to summon reinforcements. As a pale Emerson stammered into his radio, Marchant mounted the step and raced towards the Patriarch.

A bitter wind howled its elemental fury through the church. The stream was whipped into fine clouds of spray. Carter knocked the radio from Emerson's hands, shouting something about the general being out of his mind. Lullington-Smythe dived for cover. Dodo stood in the centre of chaos and cried out: 'What are you all doing? Stop it, stop it!'

Somebody grabbed her from behind, and Dodo automatically fought back until she realised it was the Doctor and he was pushing her to safety. They landed on the floor between tumbling pews. 'We've got to stop them,' she insisted. 'They don't know what they're doing.'

The Doctor held her down firmly. 'There's nothing we can do, child.'

'We should be talking!'

'It is too late for that.'

'They'll drive the gods away!'

'They think of extraterrestrials only in terms of their potential threat. They cannot comprehend that not everybody wishes

to wage war. That is why we wish to communicate directly with your people. To reassure them. To give them a say in our actions.'

'Dorothea, listen. You must not trust these people. They talk with fine words, yes, but you cannot imagine what a world under their control would be like!'

Stan did not know what to do.

General Marchant had been frozen in his tracks. The Patriarch rose from his throne again, and there was no sign now of the wound he had sustained. His face had darkened, and he looked like Joseph had looked at the base: a spirit of righteous vengeance.

The Patriarch gestured with one hand, and Marchant was lifted into the centre of an ever-increasing maelstrom. He hung there, an arm across his face to ward off the stinging winds. The gun had been ripped from his grasp. It melted, slag dripping into the storm-tossed stream. Stan felt the Patriarch's fury, although it was not voiced. The other gods had faded into the background, choosing to leave the punishment of Marchant to their leader.

Marchant and the Patriarch came face to face for a long second. Then Marchant was sent hurtling through the air, to crash down among the overturned pews. The Patriarch was upon him again, and Stan recoiled at the speed with which he had arrived. He cowered away, but could not take cover as the others had all done now.

He had a duty. To the general. To the army. To his country.

And what about his duty to the gods?

Marchant writhed, his face twisted in pain. His immaculate uniform was being torn apart, and red lacerations appeared across his skin. He was in agony, biting his lip to turn screams into a deep-throated whining rattle.

Stan's duty was clear. For perhaps the first time in his life, he knew what he had to do. He had no doubts.

He leapt at the Patriarch, arms flailing. He realised only as he landed on the creature's broad shoulders that a roar comprising equal parts defiance and terror had emerged from his lungs. It rang in his ears, and blotted out other senses too. The Patriarch struggled, and Stan closed his eyes, tried

to hold on and prayed for somebody to help him before it was too late.

He thought of his grandmother, weeping as she opened the official telegram. He wondered if she would be proud of him, for doing the right thing at last.

The next, and last, moment of which he was clearly aware found Stan lying on his back on the marble floor, and wondering why the world was turning dark.

'We would do nobody any harm. It is not our way. We exist only to help. Steven, Kathy – can you find it within yourselves to help us?'

Private Stanley Emerson was dead.

Dodo knew it as soon as his head hit the wooden arm of a pew. The sound of snapping bone made her flinch. Emerson slumped, his head at an awkward angle to his body. By Dodo's side, the Doctor stiffened with anger.

The Patriarch seemed stunned. He turned his attention from the general, who sighed in painful relief, closed his eyes and breathed deeply as his muscles relaxed. The Patriarch moved to Emerson's side, regarded him for a moment and then extended a hand.

A golden aura enveloped the fallen soldier.

Dodo thought it would be all right; that the Patriarch could undo what had been done.

But Private Emerson did not move.

The Patriarch shook his head sombrely. The other gods moved to his side, and shared in his regret. The Doctor climbed to his feet. Dodo felt a stab of fear at the thought that he too might suffer Emerson's fate. She could not move. For the first time, she knew why he had wanted her out of harm's way. For the first time, she did as he wished.

The Doctor did not shout, nor did he accuse. He just spoke, quietly and sadly. 'You see what the consequences can be? You are not perfect.'

The Patriarch lifted his head to meet the Doctor's sympathetic look. Dodo held her breath, but saw no trace of a threat in the god's expression.

Carter had stood too, emboldened by the Doctor's example. He approached the corpse and, quietly, respectfully, laid out his coat to conceal Emerson's blank, staring eyes. He knelt beside him and bowed his head in

prayer. Marchant had rolled into a ball and was sobbing. Dodo picked herself up, slid into an upright pew and watched, anxious not to call attention to herself. She could not see Smythe; presumably, he still hid somewhere in the wreckage.

'I have learned a lesson from this, it is true,' said the Patriarch finally, and Dodo wondered if it was all over. For the first time, she wanted it to be.

'The lesson is that we cannot allow ourselves to be controlled by the disruptive minority of Mankind. I am in communion with my God of Order, and he assures me that my initial observations were correct; that the common people will support us in our actions. We have need of their faith. To this end, it is time for us to extend our influence.'

'My dear fellow,' said the Doctor, an edge creeping back into his voice, 'you have learned nothing from this terrible waste of life. Nothing at all.'

'Take your people and leave this place, Doctor,' said the Patriarch. 'You have had your say, and we will consider your opinions. But our path is now clear to us.'

Dodo swallowed and bit back words of protest. The Doctor had been right all along. These so-called gods were dangerous, and only now did Dodo see that they threatened her entire world.

This adventure didn't seem exciting any more.

'OK,' said Steven, 'you can count me in. I'll join you.'

Chapter Ten

MAD MARCH

Manhattan was brought to a standstill yesterday, as six people claiming to be gods led a procession through Midtown. 'This day,' announced the group's leaden a tall, bearded figure known only as the Patriarch, 'marks the beginning of a new era.'

The march began at an abandoned church in SoHo, at which the self-proclaimed gods had previously made their base. It wended its way along the streets off Broadway to Central Park, and gathered phenomenal support. Police estimates suggest that turnout numbered in the thousands. They were given no notice of the event, but were forced to re-route Sunday afternoon traffic by the sheer weight of numbers involved.

The Patriarch and his colleagues set up home in a peculiar construct on Central Park's Sheep Meadow, where hundreds of devout followers remain with them.

The 'God of Order', a slight, unassuming man called Norman, spoke exclusively to the Ranger. 'We are here to save your world,' he said 'Our investigations have shown that we are needed. We decided to announce our presence. We are here for everybody, and we would invite the needy to come to us.' The crowd seemed eager to take Norman up on his offer; although many more hoped for the particular favor of Max the 'God of Materialism'.

'These people are causing a public order disturbance,' said a source from the mayor's office last night. 'We would urge the public to ignore them, and not to travel to Central Park. This is clearly a cruel hoax.'

However, Mary Baxter, 43, a schoolteacher from the Bronx and an enthusiastic participant in yesterday's march, thinks otherwise. 'The authorities are scared, that's all it is. They can see their power being taken from them and they don't like it. Well, they'll have to deal with it. They have had their time. The gods are here, and the people will be listening to what they say from now on.'

There was a carnival atmosphere on Broadway yesterday, enhanced by a persistent drumbeat and a fanfare of trumpets which, many claimed, came from Heaven itself. Radio reports brought spectators flocking into the city and balloons were released by the score, but no incidents of violence were recorded.

Robert Woods, 30, an engineer who travelled from Hoboken, NJ, said: 'I only came out of curiosity, but its wonderful, isn't it? All these people believe in the gods, so there must be something in it. We certainly need them.' Mr Woods, like many others, abandoned his family and job to camp out on the Sheep Meadow last night.

Not everybody agreed with his sentiments. Several religious groups mounted small counter-demonstrations, denouncing the Patriarch and his friends as phoneyes. However, Professor Byron Carter, 56, a government biophysicist and staunch Roman Catholic, said: 'Its all a matter of perspective. These people are allowing dogma to blind them to what is happening in front of them. They should open their minds.'

Miss Adrienne Ford of Long Island telephoned the Ranger offices to say: 'Who is this Patriarch guy trying to fool? I recognise him. He used to live in my block. If he was God all along, then how come he didn't stop our boiler from leaking last fall?'

Reports of what happened when the procession reached Central Park vary. The Patriarch addressed enthusiastic followers from a golden archway, connected to the ground only by a slender bridge. Some called it a triumph of engineering, others claimed that the Patriarch had conjured both archway and bridge out of thin air. An NBC news team apparently captured the event on film, but they found their pictures were fogged. The mayor's office was quick to write off the alleged miracle as a conjuring trick or a mass hallucination.

'With your faith to fuel us,' announced the Patriarch, 'we can build a new and better world.' He was answered by cheers and applause, which continued for the best part of ten minutes.

Notorious publicity mogul Alexander Lullington-Smythe claims to have orchestrated the gods' campaign. 'They are genuine,' he insisted in an official statement, 'I think you'd have to be blind not to believe them.' When pressed about

his involvement, he added: 'Of course, even gods need someone to handle their publicity, so they came to me. They wanted an expert to put their message across.

'I see myself as a modern-day St Paul, charged with spreading the word. In the old days, that meant writing to the Corinthians and whoever; but today it's a matter of organising press conferences and photo shoots and interviews.'

When asked what the gods' next move would be, Mr Lullington-Smythe faltered before answering simply: 'Watch this space.'

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(front page and pp2-3)*

The march had been incredible. Dodo had straggled along at its rear, and only the Doctor's visible disapproval had kept her from abandoning her doubts and plunging joyously into its centre. Well, let him be a sourpuss, she had thought. In years to come, they'll talk about this day, and I'll be able to say I was here.

But she had thought about Stanley Emerson, and had known in the pit of her stomach that the Doctor was right to be sceptical. If only she could have been here alone and just enjoyed it, without the responsibility of seeing what others could not.

Professor Carter had had similar doubts. He had walked with them for much of the way, seeking the Doctor's counsel. 'Is it not written that gods can be vengeful? If young Emerson did not believe in them, if he fought them, I mean, I know it's unfortunate, but should we allow it to jeopardise the chance we have been given?'

The Doctor had responded with a withering look. Carter had left, disappointed, wrapped up in his own thoughts. Could he have been right? Perhaps so. But, then, why pray to vengeful gods anyway? Dodo wanted her gods to be benevolent and understanding.

Like Joseph.

She sat with the Doctor now, in the fading light, on a rocky, grass-tufted incline at the south end of Central Park. He had steered her away from the Sheep Meadow before the Patriarch's address had begun, opining that there would be nothing new for them to hear. People hurried by frequently, to witness the event for themselves. Dodo longed to join them.

‘Would it be so bad?’ she ventured.

‘I hope you do not doubt me as well, child. These beings have duped too many rational people already. I have told you that to allow them free rein over this planet would be disastrous. Disastrous!’

‘They seem to have good intentions.’

‘Oh yes, so they say, so they say. And how do we know we can trust them, hmm?’ Dodo opened her mouth to respond, but the Doctor continued. ‘Besides, good intentions are not always enough. I am sure I have made that point perfectly clear.’

‘Then help them,’ Dodo suggested. Yes, it was a good idea. ‘Why not? They’ve got all this support now; they’re really in a position to do something. Instead of fighting them, why not help them to do the right thing?’

The Doctor clambered to his feet angrily. ‘I sometimes wonder what you children learn from your time with me. I certainly don’t put these fanciful ideas into your heads.’ With that, he scrambled back down onto the path.

Dodo wondered what she had said. ‘Where are you going?’

He looked back at her, with a sullen expression. ‘I am returning to my ship, young lady, to give some thought as to how we might correct this intolerable state of affairs.’

He marched towards the gate. With a wistful glance in the direction of the Sheep Meadow, Dodo sighed and elected to follow him.

The sky was darkening. The first of the stars had become visible. In the twilight, the Gateway seemed all the more impressive. From his privileged position at the foot of the Rainbow Bridge, Steven gazed up at it admiringly.

The Gateway was huge: easily six metres high at its apex. It was a magnificent golden arch, studded with jewels of all shapes and colours. Light played with the gems: at first, the light of the sun and, now that that had gone, the light of candles from the crowd. Steven could have lost himself in the kaleidoscopic patterns of colour.

Through the Gateway, he could see only roiling clouds of mist. They seemed to extend for ever, and yet the Gateway was only about a foot thick, and the trees of Central Park stood where they had stood for almost a hundred years, behind it. Nor was it an illusion. After the Patriarch’s address,

the six gods had disappeared into the Gateway, with a promise that they would attend to the faithful tomorrow.

Most incredibly of all, the Gateway hovered in mid-air, some six feet up. Its sole connection to the ground was a paper-thin bridge, which described a gentle arc of about twenty feet in length and disappeared into the grass. It was red at its leftmost edge, violet at the right. In between, all the colours of the spectrum segued naturally from one extreme to the other. The bridge shimmered with internal luminance.

The construct was impossible and beautiful. And Steven had seen the gods create it from, they had said, air molecules, which had given him pause to consider how powerful they were. Perhaps, he reassured himself, they had used advanced equipment to remove a cloak of invisibility, or to summon the construct from interstitial time or another dimension. He didn't have to believe in their omnipotence.

But he was beginning to believe it.

Steven wondered if he was being a fool. Exploitative cults had existed in his own time. He knew what their peculiar brand of madness led to. And yet, here he was, one of a dozen handpicked volunteers who were acting as... well, as high priests, he supposed. The golden band on his left arm drew respectful, even jealous, looks from the crowd. At the gods' insistence, they had formed a circle, some ten people thick and with a radius of eight metres or so, around the Gateway and the bridge. Only the chosen dozen were allowed to cross the circle's circumference. Steven shifted from foot to foot and clasped his hands behind his back, uncomfortably aware of being stared at. He began to feel useless, guarding something that nobody dared approach.

Kathy Marchant sensed his restlessness. 'They won't mind if you take a few hours off,' she assured him.

'Do you think so?'

'Sure. My armband's coming off soon, anyway, I've a story to file.'

'Of course. How do you think you'll get on?'

'I'm leaving it 'til the last minute, so Bushkin won't have time to change much. I'll have to be careful, though. If it looks too credulous, I'll be a laughing stock. I have to present both sides, and just be as positive as I can.'

'So long as you whip up interest,' said Steven, 'that seems to be the main thing. People can make up their own minds, once they've seen what's going on here.'

Kathy laughed. 'You sound more confident than I am.'

'Yes, well.' Steven shrugged.

'I'd go if I were you,' said Kathy, after a contemplative pause.

'We aren't doing much good here, are we?'

'No – and we'll be busy in the morning. It makes sense to grab some rest.'

'Especially after last night.'

'Have you anywhere to go?'

'I'm not sure. I think I'll see if my friend has appeared yet.'

Steven scanned the crowd again, and was struck by the unnatural silence that pervaded Central Park – and, it seemed, the world – tonight. The few words that were spoken were whispered or murmured. The susurrations of hushed voices formed an eerie undertone to an atmosphere heavy with the expectation of momentous events. A familiar queasy sensation rose in his stomach, as he wondered again if he was doing the right thing.

Steven had spent the afternoon at the offices of the *New York Ranger*, helping Kathy to phone every contact she could think of. Between them, they had been responsible for at least half of all the publicity that the gods' procession had received. Tomorrow, he had promised to take on more duties. He was committed. He had made himself responsible.

What if he had been conned after all?

Byron Carter stood at the back of the crowd. He was mesmerised by the Gateway and, now that many people were seated and he had a clear view of it, the bridge lights danced in his eyes, and he felt contented and sleepy. Every so often, an unpleasant doubt would spoil his mood, refusing to be dismissed. He had taken a chance on the Doctor. He had expanded his knowledge and had been happy at what he had learned. What if he had been wrong?

Before Emerson's death, Carter's life had briefly made sense. It had seemed worthwhile. He could not bear the thought of losing that; of having all meaning torn out of his universe for a second time.

He ought to have reported back to base by now. Marchant would have his job for going AWOL. A few days ago, the thought of the general's vengeance would have scared him witless. Now it seemed inconsequential.

Carter needed to know more.

His mind turned to the ultimate secret, and he realised with a start that it might prove possible to unearth it now. If he dared. Right or wrong, there would be no turning back. At first, he thought he couldn't do it, but the idea returned to him persistently. It became more palatable with each fresh consideration.

Whatever the answer, he thought, at least his confusion would be over.

The TARDIS doors opened at Steven's touch. Gratefully, he pushed through them, thinking of his bed. He stopped on the threshold. The interior lights were dim, perhaps responding to the mood of the control room's occupant. The Doctor stood on the far side of the six-sided console, leaning on his cane and fixing his companion with a disapproving glare.

Steven frowned. 'What is it? What's wrong?'

'I thought you might be able to tell me that, young man.'

'I don't see –' Steven began, bewildered. Then he saw that the Doctor was staring pointedly at his arm. Reflexively, he put a hand to his golden band. He felt like a schoolboy caught out in a misdemeanour. 'Oh. You know about that, then.'

'I certainly do – and just what do you think you are doing, hmm?'

Steven felt his temper flaring. 'I knew you'd react like this. What gives you the right to tell me what to think?'

The Doctor's response was equally angry. 'My knowledge, dear boy, that's what gives me the right. I know more about time than you can ever hope to learn – have learned it the hard way, indeed – and I know that what you are intending to do is utterly wrong!'

'Oh, "time" again, is it? I ought to have known. Well, that's right, Doctor, you use "time" as an excuse, only don't bother to explain it to me, will you?'

'What explanation do you need? You have seen the future, you have lived in it, and yet you are helping these gods of yours to change it.'

'They'll do that anyway. I'm just helping them to do it right.'

'Use your common sense, my boy. You are tampering with your own history. Can you not see where it might lead?'

'I don't know,' Steven shot back. 'Can I?'

'We must stop them!'

‘Oh, that’s wonderful, isn’t it? In France, we couldn’t do anything in case it altered history. Here, we have to interfere. You’re making this up as you go along!’

‘And you,’ accused the Doctor, ‘have been brainwashed by false promises.’

‘So, I’m not in my right mind now, is that it? You just can’t accept that someone might have a different point of view, can you?’

‘These gods,’ intoned the Doctor, trembling with rage, ‘are more dangerous than you can ever imagine. Oh, they’re persuasive, I don’t doubt it – but think, my boy, think They’re making you see exactly what you wish to see.’

‘And how about you? Aren’t you seeing what you want to see, too? An alien conspiracy; a chance to jump in and play hero?’

‘If you insist on following this course of action,’ warned the Doctor, ‘then you should know that I will fight you.’

‘Fine!’ snapped Steven. ‘Then, if you want me, you know where I’ll be, don’t you?’

He turned on his heel and marched back out onto the street.

Dodo didn’t know what time it was. She could have slept for hours, or minutes. The artificial light was still dim, the silence all-enveloping. She lay and enjoyed it for a while, thinking of the unnatural sounds of civilisation, which never ceased in London. Then, bored with the solitude and the sparse, white walls and ceiling, she climbed out of bed.

This room would have to be brightened up.

Her dirty clothes were where she had left them, bundled onto a chair. But, neatly arranged on a hanger suspended from the wardrobe door, was a new outfit. The Doctor’s doing, presumably. And yet, Dodo was a light sleeper. How had he not woken her?

She scowled at the neat black dress, with its knee-length pleated skirt. Decidedly uncool. The Doctor, she thought, must live in a different decade. Still, her coat would cover most of it and her friends weren’t around to see it and, anyway, it was better than wearing the same gear for the fifth day running.

Her door opened onto a white corridor, inset with pale circles. It curved out of sight in both directions. Four more doors led off this stretch. Dodo shivered. She had almost

taken this for granted before, but now she recalled the tiny shape of the Doctor's machine and wondered how he could squeeze so much into it. It was weird. Of course, she had already learned that, where her new-found benefactor was concerned, appearances were deceptive.

The Doctor had warned her not to go wandering off – but surely a quick poke around couldn't hurt? After all, she couldn't go far.

Dodo remembered that thought when, twenty minutes later, she found herself lost.

The corridors seemed to go on for ever, never varying in appearance. She had passed many doors, but she had not dared to open one for fear of finding a disapproving Doctor on its far side. Her best bet, she considered, would be to find her bedroom again. Wasn't it through this door here? Or that one? Or was it off another corridor entirely?

She chose a door, almost at random, and eased it open tentatively. She was pleasantly surprised to discover the main control room – the one that led to the front door – on its far side. She wondered what the odds against such a find were, and made herself a bet that the machine was smaller than it seemed. Clearly, she had been walking in circles.

The control room was empty, and in semi-darkness. An ormolu clock, secreted in a shadowy alcove, suggested that the time was a quarter to eleven. Dodo didn't believe it. She padded over to the main console, and allowed its gentle, flickering lights to hypnotise her. She saw a dazzling array of levers and buttons and displays, but no indication of what any of them might do. Her curiosity welled up. She could not stop herself from reaching out and, with a quick, guilty little motion, flicking an inviting red switch.

It fell off the console, with a clatter.

Startled, Dodo scabbled to pick it up and, hurriedly, jammed it back into its socket. A noise behind her alerted her to the fact of the Doctor's arrival. She turned and smiled meekly at him, using her body to conceal what her hands were doing.

'Trouble sleeping, hmm? Well, it's to be expected, first night in a new bed and all. I am sure you will get used to it.'

The Doctor moved towards the console. Dodo stepped away from it, relieved that her repair job appeared to be holding. Wait a minute – what did he just say?

'You mean,' she blurted out, 'I can stay with you?'

'Of course you can, my dear, of course, if it is what you truly want.'

'Oh, yes. I mean, it is – it truly is. That'd be fab, Doctor!'

'Good, good. Then let us hope you can find a worthwhile life with us, and not one where you are just, ah, going through the motions, shall we?'

Dodo was puzzled for a moment, until she remembered what she had said to him in Battery Park, ages ago now. Her cheeks coloured slightly. 'You were listening after all!'

'Well, of course I was,' he retorted, as if she had offended him. 'And while we are on the subject of speech, young lady, I have noticed a few, shall we say, unfortunate phrases creeping into your vocabulary of late.'

'Unfortunate?'

"'Fab", "gear", "groovy",' the Doctor elucidated, pronouncing each word as if it left a bad taste in his mouth.

Dodo laughed. She couldn't help herself. 'You sound like my great-aunt.'

'Do I? Do I indeed? Then, perhaps your guardian believes as I do that the ability to speak correctly is one of the most important things you can learn.'

'I can speak correctly,' Dodo protested, in her plummiest tones.

'Eh? Oh yes, yes, you can, can't you?' A thought had distracted the Doctor. He turned away from Dodo, knuckling his lip and staring keenly into the mid-distance.

'Doctor?'

He waved at her: a vague, dismissive gesture. He was muttering to himself. 'A different mask for each occasion. We all do it, of course, to an extent at least. But how do we see the real person? How can we know what the mask conceals? I wonder...'

'What do you mean?' asked Dodo. She had been as patient as she could.

'Think about it, child. You do not behave in the same way with me as you do with the general or your great-aunt. And, at school, I would wager, you are quite different again.'

Dodo nodded carefully, not sure what he was driving at.

'Expectations!' the Doctor announced. 'We constantly reshape ourselves to meet the expectations of others – only what happens when two of those others meet, and each is accustomed to seeing a different you? Hmm? What then?'

'Well...' Dodo remembered the time that Aunt Margaret had come to school, on some pretext or other. She had spotted Dodo in the playground and (shame of shames) had insisted on addressing her as Dorothea and reminding her of her next elocution lesson in front of her pals. Cringing with embarrassment, Dodo had not known who to be. She still didn't know.

She answered the Doctor's question with an uncertain shrug.

'Precisely, my dear,' he cried in triumph. 'Precisely!'

Steven had wandered the streets for an hour, before returning to the park because it was the only place he could go. He had spent an uncomfortable night, thinking about what the Doctor had said. And what he had said to the Doctor.

'You just can't accept that someone might have a different point of view, can you?'

It wasn't so different to the accusation that Norman had levelled at him. It applied just as well. Steven had never been so sure of himself as when his actions had been challenged, and then he had reacted automatically and defensively. Because the Doctor had made the challenge and Steven was still angry with him? Or because the old man had voiced the very doubts that he had tried so hard to suppress within himself?

He was afraid of looking stupid, for having ignored what everybody else could see.

The sun returned, but it served only to increase Steven's depression by reminding him of his tiredness and hunger. Kathy cheered him a little by arriving with bagels, coffee and the morning paper. 'Most of it got through,' she crowed. 'A few qualifications here and there, and a quote from our tame nut on Long Island, but the gist of it's there. Oh, and they changed the headline, of course. I knew putting in all those libels about Lullington-Smythe would distract Bushkin from the important stuff.'

I am doing the right thing, Steven insisted to himself, as he perused the lengthy article. But, with the gods' next appearance imminent and the crowd around the Gateway beginning to grow again, he felt more anxious than ever.

At nine o'clock, the Patriarch and his five lesser gods stepped unheralded out of the Gateway, to an uproarious reception. Steven thought he could hear distant fanfares

carried on the wind, but the cheers of the crowd made him unsure.

The Patriarch made a speech, reiterating the points he had made the previous day and asking, again, for faith. Steven longed for him to get on with it. Finally, to an audible swell of anticipation, he announced that the gods would now commune with the needy. 'Our servants,' he explained, indicating the wearers of the armbands, a disgruntled Steven amongst them, 'will discern which of you have the greatest need of our favours. Please do not approach us without their leave.'

Immediately, the crowd contracted. The people at its rear surged forward in an attempt to be noticed, while those at the front adamantly observed the sanctity of the forbidden circle. Steven took a deep breath and stepped forward to meet them. Hands reached for him, and a hundred voices cried out for attention. Overwhelmed, he did not know where to begin. He cast a glance sideways, and saw that Kathy faced a similar predicament.

'Just a few bucks, sir, and I can win back what I lost.'

'You can make her come back to me, can't you?'

'They play their music at all hours, it's driving me crazy!'

'He needs telling, we can't live on them sorta wages.'

Grasping hands pulled Steven into the mêlée. Buffeted from all sides, he grimaced and tried to close his ears to petty, self-interested requests. This was not what he had envisaged. Was it what the gods had caused? Could they offer no more?

He wondered, briefly, if Mankind deserved to be saved.

Then he found himself looking into the imploring, tear-stained face of a young woman, twenty at most, blonde hair in disarray, her make-up smudged. She clutched a small boy to her chest. He could only have been two or three years old. He was scrawny and pale. His face was soaked in sweat and tears, his closed eyelids fluttered restlessly and he fought for each breath, wheezing and spluttering. Flecks of blood decorated his chin and the woman's clothes. 'Please,' she begged, 'you've got to help him. The hospital said they couldn't do any more. I couldn't leave him there to die, could I?'

The boy was dressed in his pyjamas, beneath an overcoat too large for him.

'You're my only hope, you've got to save my son. Please!'

'Oh my God,' breathed Steven, as he realised what the Patriarch's promises had driven this desperate mother to do. He froze, uncertain. He should shout for somebody to call an ambulance, but would anybody hear or act, and where was the nearest communicator anyway? The woman bundled her child into his arms, and there was only one thing he could do. He shouldered his way back into the circle. A few people, chosen by the other volunteers, were gathering beneath the Gateway. Steven ignored them. He leapt onto the bridge and sprinted to where the gods regarded him with aloofness. 'Here!' he panted, thrusting his charge at the Patriarch. 'If you want to perform miracles, start with this one – but hurry!'

The Patriarch smiled. He took the boy from Steven, and bounced him up in the air like an indulgent father. A golden aura surrounded them both, and, when the Patriarch set the boy down again, he stood unaided and breathed freely.

'Is this satisfactory?' asked the Patriarch.

'Yes,' stammered Steven, open-mouthed. Then, enthusiastically as relief washed over him: 'Yes. Yes, it is. Thank you.'

The boy raced to his mother, who waited at the foot of the Rainbow Bridge with open arms and tears of joy. 'Oh, thank you, Lords,' she cried, 'thank you so much.'

The crowd were cheering and applauding and proclaiming that they had witnessed a miracle today. As Steven turned and looked out across the jubilant mass, he basked in their gratitude and knew that everything had been worthwhile.

'You don't understand. I have to see them. I can't explain why.'

'Sorry, pal,' said the man in the golden armband.

'But the Patriarch knows me,' Byron Carter protested, to no avail. He clenched his fists in frustration. The afternoon was growing old, and he feared the gods might retire at any moment. He had watched as miracle after miracle had whipped an increasing number of spectators into frenzy. He had known at last what to do. But, so far, five of the gods' volunteers had ignored his pleas. He couldn't bear the prospect of being denied again.

Carter found himself at the front of the crowd, staring across empty space towards the Gateway. The mere idea of violating the circle caused his stomach to tighten. Others must have felt the same. And yet, the Patriarch did know him.

He had spoken to him; had offered him a challenge, which Carter now intended to accept.

At the Gateway, the gods were attending to a woman who had lost her home in a fire. After a few words from Max, she withdrew, bowing and expressing her gratitude profusely.

Carter had his chance. He would not forgive himself if he did not take it.

He broke free of the crowd, heedless of their collective gasp of horror as he made for the Rainbow Bridge. As he reached it, he felt a dreadful weight in his heart and was sure he had presumed too much. Suddenly isolated, he came to a faltering stop at the bridge's foot and looked up at the gods. Mist from the Gateway billowed around their steadfast forms.

'What so motivates you, Byron Carter,' boomed the Patriarch, 'that you would dare to approach us unbidden?'

'F-forgive me, Lord,' he stammered, not sure that his voice would carry to the all-father, but unable to raise it. 'I have been thinking about what you said to me, and I... well, I have made a decision. I believe in you.'

Several volunteers had arrived at his side, but the Patriarch waved them away. 'I am pleased to hear it, Byron Carter. And what is it that you now desire of us so strongly?'

'I would like...' Carter began, then hesitated as the words sounded strange and unreal in his own ears. He swallowed and pressed on. 'I would like to see Heaven. If it is possible.'

A murmur of surprise and interest ran through the crowd. The Patriarch pursed his lips thoughtfully, and said slowly: 'Yes. It would be possible for you to see the home of the Gods. You realise, though, that you would be unable to return from that place?'

'Yes, Lord, I do.'

'Then approach us, Byron Carter.'

The walk along the Rainbow Bridge was the longest of Carter's life. It was fraught with fear and anticipation. At the same time, it seemed to end too soon, and he stood before the Gateway, knowing now to where it must lead. The gods had stepped aside, and Carter stared into the mist, but saw no clue as to what it might conceal.

This morning, Byron Carter had tidied his room, cancelled his magazine subscriptions and told his mother that he loved her. He had no other ties to this empty life. He remembered Brother Albert, preaching to assembly on the evils of suicide, and yet this was different. This was a leap of faith. And how

could it be wrong when the gods had given him their blessing?

He could hear nothing now, but whether that was because the crowd were silent or because of the blood in his own ears, he did not know. Byron Carter stood before the Gateway, glanced nervously to one side and found strength in Jennifer's tiny, comforting nod. He bade a mental farewell to his few friends and to his mother. Then he steeled himself, gritted his teeth and took the most difficult, and final, steps of his life. He allowed the cold, numbing mist to roll over him, and welcomed it.

Soon, Byron Carter would know everything.

Chapter Eleven

ALLURING ANNOUNCEMENTS TO ASTONISH AND AMAZE YOU

They're the wildest super-heroes ever... because they're real! Yes, in 30 short days, faithful follower, you can thrill to the ever-exciting, extraterrestrial exploits of the groovy Gods. The power-packed Patriarch and his pulchritudinous pals are coming to Wonder Comics in their brand new, bombastic, bound-to-be-a-smash-hit book. Can Mighty Max, Joyful Jennifer, Daring Dennis and Noble Norman bring light to a world that hates and fears them? You can learn the torrid truth, O seeker of enlightenment, by reserving copies of this soon-to-be-a-collector's-item classic at your local news stand today. Hallelujah!

News page, run in all Wonder Comics publications dated
February 1966

Alexander Lullington-Smythe strode into Central Park with a purpose. He had been ignored for too long. The gods had retired through the Gateway at five o'clock the previous evening, announcing that they would return at nine this morning. With an hour to go, the crowd on the Sheep Meadow had grown larger than ever. It took Smythe the best part of twenty minutes to elbow his way through them, ignoring cries of protest, but diverting his course once when a fist flew into his face and dislodged his spectacles.

'Hey, you!' he called to one of the volunteers. She turned to him with a frown. 'I have to speak to the gods. I'm their manager.' He had meant to brush past her and onto the Rainbow Bridge, but a terrible sick feeling in his stomach caused the muscles in his legs to lock. He felt as if he had been contemplating the most evil deed in the world.

'They'll be here soon,' said the volunteer coolly.

'No, no, no, you're not listening to me,' said Smythe in his most patronising tone. 'I'm not here for a handout. This is purely business. *Business*, do you understand me?'

'I haven't had any instructions,' the woman insisted. Pompous microbe, thought Smythe.

'Look, here's my card,' he said, fumbling in his coat and proffering a dog-eared scrap for inspection. He whipped it away before she could take it. Such things weren't cheap, after all. 'My name is Lullington-Smythe. You have heard of me, I take it?'

She had. And, fortunately, she had not heard much.

'Well,' she said uncertainly, 'if the gods are expecting you, I mean, I don't know how –'

'That's quite all right, my dear,' said Smythe. Somehow, her permission had restored his mobility. He gave her an ingratiating smile and swept past her. Mounting the Rainbow Bridge, he called towards the Gateway: 'Max? Patriarch? Come on, guys, where are you? It's Alex here. I need a word.'

He received no answer. Feeling the burning stares of the crowd on his back, he affected a jaunty walk towards the Gateway itself. He came to a halt before it, not daring to step through. Wasn't it the way to Heaven or something? It could wait. He inspected its glittering surface, and resisted the temptation to prise loose one of its gems.

There was no sign of a bell. He would mention that.

'Erm, hello?' he called, knocking tentatively on the inside edge of the Gateway. Cold mist billowed around him, and he took a frightened step backwards.

Suddenly, Max was on the bridge with him. Smythe could hear cheers. He overcame his shock, to shake the God of Materialism's hand and to clap him on the shoulder, making everyone aware of their close relationship. 'Max, baby, how are you?'

'Everything's cool,' said Max. 'The gig's going well, thanks to you.'

'So I see,' said Smythe, encouraged by the warm reception. 'Look, we need to have a quick pow-wow, work out a few things: where to go from here, you know?'

'I know that look, Alex. You've had some more ideas, haven't you?'

'Well, it's like this, Max. Freebies are all very well, but don't you think you've built up enough goodwill now? Time to start asking for the long green, don't you think?'

'I'm... not sure we can do that.'

'What?'

'It is not what people want.'

‘Are you mad?’ cried Smythe. “Not what they want”? What kind of talk is that? What they want is you and your friends, and they’re prepared to pay!’

‘And you feel this is important?’

‘Max, Max, you’re not thinking. What did we get into this for in the first place? You call yourself the God of Materialism, for Christ’s sake!’

‘It does not indicate that I am interested in monetary gain for myself.’

‘Why are you talking like this? All aloof and everything, all of a sudden? And, while we’re on the subject, where did all these jewels come from? You’re supposed to be broke, aren’t you? You’ve been taking cash on the side, haven’t you? That’s it, you’ve been stabbing me in the back, like everyone else does. You use my skills, like a bunch of parasites, then, when I’ve made you rich, you try and cut me out. Well, it ain’t gonna happen!’

Smythe’s ire was only increased by the fact that Max was nonplussed in the face of his shrill outburst. ‘Unfortunately, there are the wishes of others to consider now.’

‘I don’t care! We had an agreement. I own you, and it’s about time people knew it!’

‘I can provide you with a generous income.’

‘Oh yeah, and then I’ll just fade into the background? We have a contract, pal, and I’m owed big time. I’m not just gonna disappear into obscurity. I should be a star! But, seeing as you’re speaking of money, I want ten per cent of your gross revenue. That’s a few hundred of these beauties for a start.’ Smythe seized a particularly alluring diamond and attempted to wrench it from the Gateway. He shrieked as a searing current crackled through his fingers.

‘I’m afraid I cannot allow you to do that.’

‘You’ll pay for this,’ vowed Smythe. ‘I’m going to see my lawyer. I’ll drag you through the courts, you ungrateful microbes. I’ll take every red cent you’ve damn well got!’

‘If it is what you desire,’ said Max, with an unconcerned shrug.

‘I never expected it to be like this.’

Dodo felt sorry for General Marchant. He had replaced his shredded uniform and was as immaculate as ever – but, though there were no physical signs of his treatment by the

Patriarch, it had left its mark. He spoke in a lower register than before, and more quietly.

‘A fight, I was ready for. But this hysteria? What am I supposed to do? Let the armed forces of the United States be paralysed by misguided public opinion? Just wait for it to end?’

‘By then,’ said the Doctor gravely, ‘it will be too late.’

The trio stared out of the window, glumly. Marchant had requisitioned one floor of this building, from a small firm of publishers, as his new base of operations. He had taken this cluttered office, with its panoramic view of Central Park, for himself. Although the Sheep Meadow was some way distant – and a long way down – the Gateway, the Rainbow Bridge and the crowd were all large enough to be seen.

‘There’s only one thing to do,’ said Marchant, his defeated tones belying the decisiveness of his words. ‘I have to get on to the Pentagon, convince them that these "gods" are a threat, call up troops and equipment and mount a preemptive strike.’

‘But all those people,’ gasped Dodo.

‘I know.’

‘There may be another way,’ said the Doctor.

‘How?’ asked Marchant. ‘We’ve tried talking to them.’

‘I don’t know yet... Dorothea, child, tell me, what do you make of Jennifer?’

‘Jennifer?’

‘Yes, yes,’ said the Doctor impatiently, ‘I believe she calls herself the Goddess of – oh, what was it now? – yes, Love, Free Love, what do you think of her?’

‘Well,’ stalled Dodo, suspecting that the Doctor might frown upon a positive opinion. ‘I don’t know what to say. I mean, I’ve not spoken to her or anything, but, just from the outside, the way she appears, I mean, she’s beautiful. Don’t you think?’

‘I do not,’ snapped Marchant, some trace of his old, opinionated self returning. ‘She’s nothing more a disease-ridden whore! She even has the look of one.’

‘She does not,’ protested Dodo. ‘She stands for – for freedom of expression.’

‘And the destruction of morals!’

‘Excellent,’ the Doctor intervened, with a clap of his hands. ‘It is precisely as I suspected. Expectations! Did I not tell you as much, child? Hmm?’ He didn’t seem to care that Dodo

was confused. Already, he had turned away from her, and was regarding the distant Gateway again, massaging his lower lip as his eyes narrowed in contemplation. 'The question is, now we know what the gods truly are, how can we make use of that knowledge?'

'And how about you, Doctor?' asked Dodo, longing to understand. 'How does Jennifer seem to you?'

The Doctor paused for a long while, until Dodo began to feel he was not going to answer. Then, without turning around, he said, in a low tone of foreboding: 'Alien.'

Steven lowered himself to the grass with a groan, beside the first of the tents that someone had pitched for the volunteers. His duties had become less onerous now, with all twelve of the chosen practised in their tasks and working in concert. With a backlog of privileged believers queuing at the foot of the Rainbow Bridge, and the excited jangling of his nerves finally under control, he was able to rest.

And worry.

He was startled to find Max standing over him. The God of Materialism beamed warmly, as Steven scrambled to his feet. 'I believe you are in need of my services.'

'I'm sorry?'

'You need money. Will this amount suffice?' Max proffered a handful of crisp ten-dollar bills. Steven waved them away, but Max continued: 'You have not ingested an adequate meal in almost seventy-two hours. You cannot go on like this.'

'No,' admitted Steven, 'I suppose I can't.'

'You should take a break from your duties. You have worked hard.'

'Thank you,' said Steven, taking the money and feeling faintly embarrassed about it.

'And yet, the doubts you expressed to the God of Order have not been fully assuaged.'

'I'm convinced of your intentions.'

'But?'

Steven had felt like this with Norman. Like he could not hide anything. He had come to resent the feeling. He could not harbour any concern without it being dragged out for inspection, often before he had been able to articulate his opinions to himself. Once again, he was being drawn into a discussion for which he was not prepared. Still, he had no choice. He took a deep breath and replied.

'I'm happy about the people you've cured – very happy – and the slums you've renovated, and even the money you've given out. It's just this – this "Land of the Gods" business; the people you've been sending through the Gateway.' There had been three this morning, each following Byron Carter's lead.

'We do not send them through, we have simply allowed them to pass.'

'But is it the right thing to do? I mean, isn't it tantamount to suicide?'

'It is a question of interpretation.'

'But if they can't come back; if they've gone to this Land for ever...'

'Can you not see the appeal of suicide, when the existence of Heaven has been proven?'

'Well, yes. I mean, no. I mean, that's not the point, is it?'

'Is it not? We are giving these people contentment. They are happy. It is not our place to sit in judgement upon their desires.'

'I thought that was exactly what gods were supposed to do.'

'Not these gods,' said Max.

Steven found a delicatessen on Ninth Avenue, and wandered back towards the park as he feasted on a club sandwich. He had not left the company of the gods in two days, and he was surprised to find that, beyond the Sheep Meadow, life went on. Even here, at the park's westernmost border, happy tourists were borne along in horse-drawn carriages, with scant regard for what was happening through the trees, yards away. Steven watched them, and found that the sight provided him with a touchstone to mundane reality.

He wondered if the gods' actions were really so inconsequential. But then, surely small-scale aid was better than none, and he had helped to do so much. And word was spreading. Many people had been touched.

It didn't seem right, somehow.

The Doctor ambled along the path towards him. He looked for all the world like an old man taking a midday constitutional, affecting a casual interest in each detail of the flora. As he approached, he acknowledged Steven's presence as if he had only just noticed it.

'Ah, there you are, my boy.'

Steven sighed and found himself smiling. 'What is it, Doctor?'

'That little, ah, business we discussed earlier. I have, shall we say, amended my views.'

'You're admitting you were wrong? I don't believe it!'

The Doctor looked at him sharply. 'I have formed what I believe to be a more accurate hypothesis about the nature of these so-called gods of yours.'

Steven shook his head, with equal parts amusement and despair. Of course, it had been too good to be true. He sank onto a bench and the Doctor perched beside him, hands clasped atop his walking cane. 'Let's have it then,' said Steven resignedly. 'What do you think they are now? Shape-shifting mercenaries?'

'No, no, nothing of the kind. In fact, these beings are quite harmless in themselves. Quite harmless. They are near mindless, you see. At least, they were.'

'No, I don't see.'

'Think about it, dear boy, think. These beings have admitted to being shaped by our needs; our very thoughts. They have no life without them. Have they not said as much to you?' Without waiting for an answer, the Doctor continued: 'They appeared to the army as grey-skinned extra-terrestrials, because that is what the army expected to see.'

'After the business at Roswell, I suppose.'

'Amongst other places. And yet, there have been eyewitness reports of green monsters with tentacles: the more traditional science-fiction alien of this time.'

'They do look different from time to time, even now.'

'Indeed. Myself, I saw them as evil beings bent on the domination of your world, because –' The Doctor gave a wistful sigh – 'I have become accustomed to such things. And to those who have prayed for salvation from a higher authority, these beings have appeared as just that. It is this group, Steven, whose powerful desires have held sway; whose hopes and expectations have shaped everything about our alien visitors. Not just their forms and deeds, but their personalities too. Their very minds.'

'That's preposterous!'

'Is it? By your time, scientists have discovered subatomic particles that are altered by the very act of observing them. How can we know their true nature?'

‘But even so, Doctor, we’re talking about intelligent beings.’

‘Are we? Why do you think belief is so important to them?’

‘You’re saying,’ Steven began thoughtfully, ‘as word about them spreads, more people begin to share the same perception of them. They become more stable, I suppose. Not torn apart by hundreds of different ideas of what they ought to be.’

To his dismay, it was beginning to make sense. And yet...

‘Precisely. Now do you see?’

‘I see that the gods are exactly what people think they are – for whatever reason.’

‘No, no, no.’

‘Yes. They could even be the Gods of Myth after all. If those same beings came to Earth in the past, and were shaped by the expectations of the time –’

‘You’re not thinking this through!’ the Doctor scolded. ‘You talk of these beings becoming more stable, and yet you must know that this world of yours harbours an extraordinary variety of faiths. Everybody expects something different from their deities, my boy, and those expectations are often quite incompatible. Oh, it’s all very well asking your gods to heal and provide for you, and they are doing that job quite adequately, but what happens when they are confronted by more serious problems, hmm? As, mark my words, they will be. It is what people will expect of them – and yourself included, I don’t doubt.’

‘They’ll go along with the majority view, surely.’

‘Oh, and that will be the right thing to do, will it?’

‘In most cases, yes.’

‘So, if these gods were to ask the people of New York how they should meddle in the affairs of other countries, they’ll be given a simple, right answer, will they? If they ask what should be done about Vietnam, they’ll come to a fair decision? What if, on the Earth of your time, they intervened in the colony uprisings, on the side of the majority? Would you approve of that?’

Steven swallowed uncomfortably. Like the gods, the Doctor had a knack for hitting raw nerves. Sometimes, Steven suspected that the old man could read minds too.

‘Look at it this way,’ said the Doctor, clearly in full flow and with no intention of letting up until Steven gave in. ‘Mankind has created its own gods; these poor, hapless beings are just

the raw material. And those gods can do whatever Mankind desires of them. Now, you have seen the state of this world and this time. Do you really think your race is mature enough to handle the most powerful weapon in the cosmos?’

Forced to answer by the Doctor’s demanding glare, Steven muttered a reluctant: ‘No.’

‘No,’ agreed the Doctor quietly. ‘The most promising outcome of such a scenario is utter self-annihilation. And I shudder to think of the alternatives.’

‘We have to get rid of them, somehow, don’t we?’

‘As I have said from the start.’

‘As you said,’ admitted Steven, sighing deeply and wondering why the Doctor always had to be right, even when he was wrong.

Dodo had been in the way at the army’s makeshift HQ, although she had taken note of Marchant’s heavy hints only when she had decided for herself that she was bored. The Doctor had given her some American money (where it had come from, she did not know) and had sent her off to explore. Thoughts of the gods had faded with surprising speed, and she had enjoyed being a tourist in the liveliest city on Earth. She had seen the lower floors of the Empire State Building, but had declined to wait in line for the elevator (well, it wasn’t as if it was the tallest building in the world any more). In Macy’s Department Store, she had been disappointed to learn that the Doctor’s handout would not stretch to any decent clobber. She had made do with a scarf, patterned with multicoloured jagged lines.

Now she mooched along Broadway, investigating the shops that she had glimpsed on Sunday’s procession. As she gazed longingly at a pair of fancy gold earrings in a jeweller’s window, she realised she was not alone.

She glimpsed his reflection in the glass first, then whirled around, with a gasp, to face him in person. ‘Hello, Dorothea,’ he said with a smile.

‘Joseph! What are you doing here? You startled me.’

‘I missed you.’

‘You – missed *me*?’ Dodo almost laughed. She glanced around, to be sure that she was still awake and standing in the middle of a busy street. No passers-by even spared her a look. They saw only a man and a girl, talking. Joseph had shed his unusual garb in favour of a nondescript suit.

‘You are my best friend.’

‘Oh no, not that again.’ She backed away, but couldn’t go far. She felt the glass of the jeweller’s window on her back. ‘If you touch me, I shall scream!’

‘I am sorry for what I have done in the past, when I was newly born. I am a whole person now. You are responsible for that, Dorothea. You have made me what I am, and part of you will always reside within me. I do not wish to lose your companionship.’

‘But,’ she stumbled, ‘you have other friends now: people like you.’

‘No. The other gods are not like me. Their experiences have differed. Others have shaped them. My experience is unique, and you are its most important part. The gods are my family and I love them, but I am still alone amongst them. Our bond is stronger.’

When pressed, the Doctor had told Dodo something of the nature of the gods. She was not sure she had understood it all. But Joseph’s claim that she had somehow created him struck a chord. There was a bond there, but she could not explain it. Oddly, she felt as if she had moulded Joseph from clay; turned him, stage by stage, into a perfect man. And she did like him now. He was amenable and kind, and his gentle naïvety was appealing. Dodo had not experienced love before, and a part of her wondered if this was it. She poured scorn on that soppy notion.

‘I don’t know what I feel,’ she confessed.

‘You do not hate me?’

‘Oh, Joseph, of course I don’t!’

His face lit up with simple, childlike delight.

‘But I hardly know you,’ Dodo said quickly, to dampen his (perhaps dangerous) enthusiasm.

‘We can rectify that. Let us find out more about each other.’

‘What do you suggest?’ she asked warily.

‘You are engaged in exploring this conurbation? Let us explore together. I would appreciate first-hand experience of your civilisation. It will aid my growth. You can show me what is considered to be of interest.’

It couldn’t do any harm, could it? And the idea of being a tour guide – of being considered, somehow, knowledgeable and worldly wise despite her limited experience – was a pleasant one. Dodo smiled and nodded. ‘OK, you’re on.’

Joseph extended an elbow. It took Dodo a moment to realise that he expected her to link her arm with his. Doing so made her feel like a real lady. She giggled, as they set off towards Times Square.

Three hours and much walking later, she found herself by Joseph's side on the observation deck of the Empire State Building. He had asked to see it, and she had been happy to indulge him. She had begun to feel comfortable with Joseph, despite the occasional hint of his strange origins. He reminded her of the Doctor, in that respect.

The sight of the city spread below them, its skyscrapers like Lego buildings and its cars tiny moving patterns of colour, was a sobering one. It looked so different. Try as she might, Dodo could identify no more than one or two places. They looked out towards the Hudson River, and neither of them spoke for a time. 'From this viewpoint,' Joseph ventured finally, 'there is no need for gods. Misery cannot be seen from a distance.'

'I thought you could sense it. I thought it brought you here.'

'That was in the time before, when I was formless. I am whole now, and have control over my thoughts.'

'Just 'cos you can't see something doesn't mean it isn't there.'

'Nonetheless, this window provides an intriguing perspective.'

Dodo sighed. 'I know what you mean. I feel like I never want to go down there again.'

'Then perhaps I can arrange it for you.'

'Oh no, I didn't mean –'

'Trust me, Dorothea.'

'I do,' she said automatically. And she did, although still she had to keep herself from flinching as Joseph placed an arm around her. Suddenly, she was toppling backwards and his other arm was behind her knees and he was carrying her and...

And he had left the ground.

'Joseph!' Dodo cried in terror, as they hurtled towards the window.

This time, Smythe had no compunctions about forcing his way through the crowd, across the forbidden circle and towards the Rainbow Bridge. The document in his hand gave him power. He had called in a few old debts to have it

prepared so quickly; had overdrawn his account too, despite what the bank manager had threatened last time. It would be worth it.

Smythe marched past the short queue at the foot of the bridge. The woman at its head made a grab for him with vicious fingernails, and swore. 'Get off me, you old dragon!' snapped Smythe. 'I'm here on business.'

He stepped onto the bridge. Above him, at the Gateway, an old man was kneeling before five of the six gods. The new one – the one Smythe didn't know – was missing. 'OK, you lot,' he shouted, 'you wanted to play hardball. Well, play with this!' He waved the document in triumph, then realised he would have to approach the gods to serve it. His nerve almost failed him, but he forced himself to cross the bridge, with an awkward little run. 'Here,' he said, stuffing the document into the hands of the bemused Patriarch. 'It's a writ, for breach of contract. Either pay up, or I'll see you in court.' He stepped back with a victorious smile, folding his arms to show that he was steadfast.

His hay fever chose that moment to act up. A ferocious sneeze ruined the effect for which Smythe had striven.

'This man fancies himself our manager,' announced the Patriarch, his voice carrying clear and loud across the huge open space. 'He wishes the gods to charge for their services. He has lackeys draw up documents such as this when we refuse to exploit those who need us. And, of course, he intends to profit from our deeds himself.'

It wasn't the grovelling surrender for which Smythe had hoped. Abuse was being hurled at him from all around; cries of 'boo' and 'shame'. He hadn't meant for his business to be so exposed. Did these people have no professional ethics?

'It isn't like that and you know it,' he spluttered indignantly to the Patriarch. 'I've done work for you: set up appearances, advertised. It doesn't come free, you know. I knew you lot when you had nothing. When you were nothing!'

But the Patriarch was not giving him a chance, and the crowd was on his side. Smythe could hardly hear his own voice for their barracking. 'Just you contact your lawyers, that's all,' he said, and tried to make it sound like a threat. He turned to leave.

'Hold,' the Patriarch commanded.

The flesh on Smythe's neck crawled. Somehow, he had to do as he was bidden.

‘Our subjects would see you punished for your presumption.’

‘What?’

‘You will become in actuality what you are already in spirit.’

‘What are you talking –?’

Suddenly, Smythe was unable to speak. Then he could not breathe.

His body was twisting; changing. He felt as if his arms were pinned to his sides, until he realised that he had arms no longer. Nor legs. He fell onto his stomach and floundered helplessly. His neck – if he could call it that – stretched up to his tiny mouth. He tried to suck air through the mouth, and realised belatedly that it was not necessary. He was absorbing oxygen through skin that was slimy and wet. The loss of eyes and ears plunged him into a world of helplessness. He thrashed his segmented body about, and panicked as he felt himself slithering over the edge of the Rainbow Bridge; landing with a heavy plop.

He was himself again: Alexander Lullington-Smythe, wriggling in the dirt, panting as restored lungs pumped air into his system. He scrambled to his feet, and stared up at where his molesters stood, impassive as always. The onset of tears would have choked words, had he thought of any to hurl.

The reaction of the crowd – their spiteful laughter – disabused Smythe of the notion that his experience had been illusory. He had suffered humiliation before – and, on occasion, it had been public – but not like this. He felt unspeakably violated; dirty inside. Burning with embarrassment and fury, breathing heavily and shallowly through gritted teeth, he pushed his way through the amused onlookers and did not care who stood in his path.

Only when he was clear of the hateful microbes did he turn again, and raise his head, and shoot a venomous glare back at the Gateway as he swore bloody vengeance on the gods.

The glass had parted for them. They flew above Manhattan’s famous skyline, and Dodo felt wind rushing into her face. The toy city that had seemed so beautiful and untroubled now terrified her. She wrapped her arms around Joseph’s neck and buried her face in his chest.

‘Trust me,’ he said again.

She did. She really did.

She felt so precarious, held aloft only by the strength in his arms. And yet, as those arms encircled her, they felt like bands of steel. So solid and reliable. If Dodo didn't look, she could almost imagine she was riding an open-topped tram, so slight was the feeling of motion. She risked a peep – not downwards – and was struck by the beauty of the sky and of the ribbons of clouds through which they flew.

They flew.

Five days ago, Dorothea Chaplet had been imprisoned by a stifling world of boredom. Now she flew above New York City, in the arms of an angel or a god.

Her terror was diluted by giddy exhilaration. She felt wonderfully weightless. Something fluttered in her stomach.

She risked looking down. The first time, terror struck again and she turned away. The second, she was able to look longer; to see the flow of life in the big city and to revel in the feeling of being high above it all, in a place where none of it mattered. Swept along in the moment, she entertained the insane notion of never setting foot on land again. Of allowing Joseph to whisk her away to a fairy-tale realm beyond the clouds, where she could be a princess. It had been a recurring childhood dream, about which she had forgotten. She had thought it wrung out of her by hard years of life.

'I would show you my world now,' said Joseph, and Dodo could manage only another gasp as her breath was stolen from her by delighted surprise.

Her stomach rose into her chest as Joseph entered a dive, which, though it seemed gentle at first, brought buildings screaming towards them. Dropping beyond the tops of those buildings was like falling into a concrete valley and, for an instant, Dodo felt imprisoned again, cut off from wonders that she had only just discovered. She closed her eyes and, when she reopened them, she was barely ten feet above street level and the city was real again. Shocked commuters and tourists paused to stare up at her and to point. They were gone before she could catch their exclamations. Dodo heard a distant squeal of brakes and thought there might have been an accident, but could not be sure.

Concrete gave way to trees, and she regained her bearings and knew that she had been brought back to Central Park.

And Dodo realised then what Joseph intended to do.

Steven stood by the volunteers' tents, thinking bitter thoughts. He could not serve the gods any more, nor could he bring himself to put the Doctor's plan into action. Not yet. Soon, though. It was inevitable, after what the gods had done to the fellow with the writ. Steven had been sickened. He had encountered mob mentality before, and it was an ugly phenomenon. The gods – the beings – had fed off it, making real the darkest wishes of bloodthirsty followers. Steven had seen what the Doctor had tried to explain. The gods weren't in control here; the people were. He was terrified of what they might do next.

But some good things had come out of this. People had been helped. Couldn't there be another way? To take the good, without the bad? The Doctor had thought not.

Something created a stir in the crowd. Heads were upturned; fingers were pointing. Steven barely had time to look up and to gain the impression that a tiny comet was streaking towards the Sheep Meadow, before it alighted on the Rainbow Bridge and he saw that it was a man. The sixth god, Joseph. And, cradled in his arms, was a slighter form: a teenaged girl, with short dark hair and elfin features. Steven frowned. Did he recognise her? He moved closer. Of course. It was Dorothea Chaplet.

Joseph swept her towards the Gateway.

'No!' cried Steven, breaking into a run. 'No, you can't. Dorothea, come back!'

He only regretted that he had not acted sooner; had not saved others from this fate. And that he could not help this time. Like always. Feeling responsible, but useless.

None of the other gods moved. They watched as Steven reached the foot of the bridge, too late. Dorothea and Joseph were already being swallowed up by opaque mist.

He had been fighting for the wrong side.

'Dodo!'

So he railed against those in power; those who had promised salvation, but delivered only misery and death.

Steven's cry went unheeded. He felt exposed and alone.

But nothing had changed, after all.

Chapter Twelve

HARD CHOICES [extract]

People laughed when the gods turned me into a big leech, but they'd laugh on the other side of their faces soon. What they didn't realise then was, the gods didn't like me because they knew I was on to them and was fighting against them. They made a mistake when they messed with me though. A lot of people who saw it knew me and were disgusted at what these so-called gods did to me. It stirred up a lot of resentment. It also increased my resolve to defeat the gods once and for all, which was bad news for them as it happens. So, really, the whole thing rebounded on them and it serves them right.

How I Saved the World by Alexander Lullington-Smythe,
pub. Aphrodite Ltd, 1976

'New York Ranger, is it? Yeah, I got a quote. I got a friggin' problem, man. I mean, I dunno what I expected. These gods, they're all white, yeah? So I says to them, I says, what about the Negro then? What about the Freedom March to Selma? If you wanna change the world, why weren't you there when they tried to do us in wi' tear gas and clubs? When that governor wouldn't talk to us; wouldn't even talk to Dr King? I ask the gods, I ask them, are they gonna support us then? Join the boycott against Alabama 'til they give us the vote and kick out racist cops? Wouldn't lift a finger, man. Said they'd sort me out with a friggin' job, but couldn't "ct without a mandate". Siding with their own kind, that's all you can expect from whitey. They don't give a fig about us. They ain't our gods, man, they're yours.'

Marchant turned away from the window. He knew that, if he looked any longer at the Gateway, his anger would become uncontrollable.

How dare they do this to his world?

'If I could just order a strike,' he grumbled, 'wipe out the lot of them in one go.'

'Along with several hundred civilians,' the Doctor said pointedly.

'I know, I know.' He had agreed to the Doctor's plan, but he didn't have to like it.

'And, even then, your bombs would be unlikely to do much harm to the gods. Apart from which, they are innocent beings.'

Marchant was in no mood to hear this lecture again. 'I'm a soldier, damn it. I can't just sit here and let those things take over the hearts and minds of my country.'

'It is for their hearts and minds that we are battling.'

'With words!'

'Yes, with words. They can be effective weapons, if you know how to use them.'

'Well, I don't see any effect.'

'Oh, there will be, my dear fellow, I can promise you that. Do you think I would be sitting here otherwise, when young Dorothea could be in danger?'

'I could send a detail through the Gateway.'

The Doctor shook his head. 'No, no. If my deductions are correct, then that is the worst thing you could do. I shall have to hope that Dorothea is safe for now. We shall proceed with my original plan. Oh yes, the effect will be a small one at first, I grant you, but it will spread and grow like ripples on a pond.' He leaned back in his chair and smiled to himself, apparently pleased with his simile 'Oh, and did I mention...?' he asked after a moment. 'I, ah, recruited a new ally last night.'

'No, you did not.'

'Yes, yes, a most enthusiastic young woman. A friend of a friend, you might say. She works as a reporter on... er, the *New York Ranger*, I believe.'

A dark suspicion crept over Marchant. He regarded the Doctor through narrowed eyes.

'She will help to disseminate our, ah, well I suppose you would call it propaganda.' The Doctor raised an eyebrow. 'In fact, I believe you already know her?'

As if Charles Marchant needed another complication in his life.

He suspected that the Doctor had done this on purpose.

Joseph stood uncomfortably before the Gateway, shifting his weight from foot to foot. He resisted the urge to yawn, not with tiredness – he could have eradicated that with a thought – but with boredom. What was wrong with him? The Patriarch wanted him here, and he was happy to do as the all-father bade him. Humanity's need for its gods was not sated. But Joseph had a life too. He chafed to leave this bothersome world behind, to return to the things that mattered to him. Was he being selfish?

Another human had traversed the bridge to stand before the gods. Unlike most, he did not gaze up at the Patriarch in awe. His demeanour was cool and confident; his attention was reserved for Joseph. The God of Peace returned his look quizzically.

'We recognise you, do we not?' asked the Patriarch, frowning his brow.

'We do, sir,' counselled Norman 'He is Steven Taylor: one of our servants.'

'And now you wish to receive our favour yourself?'

'In a way,' said Steven Taylor. 'I want to ask him a question.' He nodded towards Joseph. The Patriarch raised an eyebrow.

'Ask it.'

'What have you done with the girl?'

Joseph felt concern emanating from the human. Concern that, somehow, Dorothea had been harmed. He did not understand.

'Dorothea Chaplet. You took her through the Gateway, yesterday.'

'You question the motives of a god?' asked the Patriarch, in a dangerous tone.

Steven Taylor was unrepentant. 'Dorothea is a friend. I don't want her hurt.'

'She will not be,' said the Patriarch. 'She is under our care.'

'And she wanted to go through the Gateway, did she? She said that?'

'I believe it is what she wanted,' said Joseph, determined that the all-father would not answer for him this time. Still, he was disquieted by the challenge. Had he really acted in accordance with Dorothea's desires? He had to believe he had.

'I want to speak to her.'

‘You cannot,’ said the Patriarch. ‘She resides in the Land of the Gods now, and from there no one may return. Those who enter must know this.’

‘You go back and forth yourselves easily enough.’

‘I will hear no more of your impertinence,’ exploded the Patriarch. ‘You have had your answer. Now return to your duties and think yourself lucky I do not smite you.’

Steven Taylor set his jaw defiantly, but said no more. Joseph felt his pain.

‘I assure you that Dorothea will come to no harm,’ he insisted. ‘She is my friend and I will protect her. She will be happy.’

Joseph sensed Steven Taylor’s reluctance as, conceding defeat for now, he turned and walked away. He longed more than ever for his duties here to be over. He needed to return to Dorothea. Perhaps the human had been right. Had he really given his best friend what she wanted? Or had he allowed his own desires to take prominence over hers? If so, he would have to atone for it. Fulfil his promise.

One way or another, he would make Dorothea Chaplet happy.

‘The way they treated us, it was criminal. Criminal, I tell you! And the Germans – the Germans, mind – vote to let ‘em off with it, so we just roll over and let ‘em. Two years, I spent in one of their stinking camps. It’s criminal! Oughtn’t to be allowed. The gods oughtta do somethin’ about it, but they don’t care, do they? Feeling’s not strong enough, they said. Nobody cares. The gods think they can dish out a bit of lousy money and it’ll make it all right. Five hundred lousy bucks, for what I went through, while the Ratzis are out there living like kings. They ought to be hunted down and strung up for what they done. It’s criminal!’

‘Excellent,’ said Steven’s ‘Doctor’ friend, with quiet satisfaction. ‘Excellent.’

Kathy returned her notebook to her pocket, and reflected on how quickly things could change. From being a loyal servant of the gods to sitting on a folding chair in the tent they had provided and plotting to bring them down, in less than eighteen hours. From acting to expose her father to doing his work. But Steven’s friend had been persuasive.

'I'm not asking you to trust me,' he had said, when they had been introduced last night. 'As a journalist, I am sure you are quite aware of the importance of gathering evidence, hmm?'

And gather it she had. For herself.

'Well,' she said, 'people are becoming disillusioned. You were right: the gods can't handle the difficult stuff, can they?'

'No, no, quite, my dear. They can only reflect the opinions of those around them, and, in a crowd of this size, opinions are bound to be divided.'

'Except for one thing: they all believe in the gods, or else they wouldn't be here.'

'Well, not for long, I hope.'

'My piece in tomorrow's paper should be pretty damning, the way the interviews are going. I'm not sure I want to come back here after it's seen print, though.'

'Just remember my instructions: you must stress the fact that these gods are not all-powerful. Talk about Götterdämmerung and Ragnarok; make their downfall seem inevitable. And tell your readers why they deserve it, why it must happen. Make them believe!'

'I just have one question,' said Kathy. 'Why are we doing this? I mean, wouldn't it happen anyway, sooner or later? The gods would have to face these problems eventually, even if we weren't pushing them forward like we are.'

'And, by the time they did,' said the Doctor, an edge to his voice as if he did not appreciate being questioned, 'the idea of the gods as arbiters might just have taken hold. They might indeed begin to make decisions, on matters that are not theirs to decide. Not to mention what might happen if other, er, situations, were brought to their attention. No, I am afraid we have no choice in this matter. No choice at all.'

'Ah well,' said Kathy, 'seems a bit of a shame, but I guess you're right.' He raised an eyebrow, and she smiled. 'Well, don't look so surprised. I know I've been helping them, but that was before I'd heard the full story. Everything you've said to me makes sense.'

'Thank you,' said the Doctor, and he seemed genuinely touched by her faith. 'I only wish a few more people shared your common sense.'

Kathy almost asked if he was talking about her father. But did she really want to know?

'I never believed in gods anyway,' she said with false cheer, kidding herself that she had turned her mind to a different topic. 'I just needed a good excuse not to.'

'I – I went to them for help. I thought they'd be able to tell me what to do. They're gods, aren't they? This – this thing inside me (I'm sorry, I can't...) it's just – it's just, I know it's wrong, but – but would it be killing? I mean, is it alive? No one can tell me. I – I can't – I just can't have his baby, but will I be damned if... why wouldn't they tell me? The Pope doesn't (oh, God forgive me) – the Pope doesn't know; he's putting together committees and talking about if it's all right or not, but it doesn't help me, does it? It's too late. What if I go ahead with, with – with this, and it turns out to be wrong? What then? I wanted the gods to tell me what to do. What sort of gods are they, if they can't do that?'

'I'm sorry sir, I know you didn't want to be disturbed, but this guy says he knows you and –'

'Yes, yes, all right, soldier. Dismissed.'

The private saluted and backed out of the office. General Marchant regarded his visitor coldly. 'Let's have it then. I'm a busy man, in case you hadn't noticed.'

'I want to help you,' said Alexander Lullington-Smythe.

'A bit late for that, mister.'

'I'll tell you anything you want to know now.'

'Oh yes? And what exactly do you know?'

'Well, not much really, but –'

'Get out!'

'I hate these so-called gods as much as you do. I can help you. I'm their manager, aren't I?'

'That's not the way I heard it.'

'I can use my influence.'

'I doubt you have any.'

'They humiliated me!' Smythe was almost in tears. 'I want to get back at them!'

Marchant hesitated. Much as he disliked this oily character, he could at least identify with his motives. He nodded briskly. 'If you want to help, get back to the Sheep Meadow. Circulate. Tell people what you think.'

'Is that all?'

'Tell them how you managed the gods. Tell them you found out they were frauds.'

‘But – but they’re not, are they?’

‘Look,’ yelled Marchant, ‘do you want to help or not?’

‘I won’t be sidelined,’ Smythe said petulantly. ‘I want to do something important.’

‘Then follow orders, mister.’

Smythe gave a childlike snort of rebellion, but left without saying any more. He slammed the door behind him. Marchant sighed and rubbed his tired eyes. A week ago, anyone – even a troublesome civilian like Smythe – would have snapped to attention at the general’s command. He was losing his credibility; losing it to a lack of confidence.

The ironic thing was, Marchant had detailed Smythe to the most important task he had. It galled him to admit that, with the might of the armed forces standing poised on his word, the best he could do was send a few soldiers out to the park in civvies to spread rumours, on the say-so of a possibly senile old alien.

He hated to think what the history books would make of this.

He hated to think what his daughter would make of it.

And so, for the first time in fifteen years, Kathy Marchant knew where to find her father.

She stood in the deserted lobby of the office building and stared at the elevator doors, as if daring herself to press the call button. Did she really want to do this? She had spent the past morning and night telling herself that she was not thinking about him at all.

She had always envisaged an accidental meeting. Bumping into him by chance because their career paths had ‘happened to intersect’. Acting all casual about it. Making him think she cared as little as he clearly did. Given the opportunity to walk up to his office door and just knock, she found herself questioning the whole point. What did she expect to gain? What did she have to say to him? What did she want to hear?

He knew where she was too, thanks to the Doctor. He did not want to see her. He had not wanted to see her for fifteen years. Wasn’t it time to let this obsession go?

Far worse, thought Kathy, if the elevator arrives now and he steps out and catches me in the act of almost-maybe coming to see him.

She had been here for fifteen minutes. Too long. There was work to do. Important work. She had to go. Yes, that was the reason. No time.

She hurried back out of the building and wove her way through traffic towards Central Park, not waiting for the 'Walk' sign. She studiously did not think about her father any more.

She badly needed a smoke.

A flash of hatred surprised Joseph as a three-man delegation marched along the Rainbow Bridge in formation. They were garbed in white robes and pointed hoods. The image had stirred up nasty connotations from the memories of Neville Albert Miller.

The delegation's spokesman confirmed Joseph's suspicion. The men belonged to an organisation known as the Ku Klux Klan. Their spokesman read from a prepared statement.

'President Johnson would besmirch the Klan's name with wild accusations based on speculation. Our Imperial Wizard has proof that the killings in Alabama were a Communist plot against us, but he will not listen. He hopes to bury our message beneath innuendo. Our fear is for our country if he succeeds. Immigration is out of control. Jobs and homes are being taken from us, while the president discriminates against his own people. Only this week, an honest restaurateur found himself in court, to be told that he cannot choose who to serve on his own premises. We have come to you, Lords, who created the nigras to be inferior, to help us spread that truth; to put an end to this madness.'

'I see,' said the Patriarch slowly.

'You cannot be considering this, Father,' cried Joseph, stepping forward.

The Patriarch's eyes scrolled around in their sockets to glare at his defiant son. 'The idea has much support from the masses.'

'But a majority, Father? Do the majority believe? There are those who would see these men struck dead for the hate-filled lies they preach.'

'I am tired of making compromises,' the Patriarch thundered. 'Throughout this day, we have been faced with problem after problem, to find the opinions of our subjects divided. We have been weak, indecisive, useless. Mankind is

losing its faith in us. They expect us to rule; to make judgements. Perhaps it is time we did so.'

'Then rule against these racists!'

'Their belief in what they ask of us is strong.'

Jennifer intervened. 'In the name of love, Father, I must side with Joseph. It is the belief of most that we ought to accept our fellow beings, whatever their colour or creed.'

'Not in war,' snorted Dennis, 'and this is war. Each side will accept no compromise.'

'The situation is chaotic,' said Norman. 'Order cannot be restored until the war is done.'

'I can sympathise with the Klan's fear of having their country's material assets spread too thinly over an increasing population,' said Max.

The Patriarch gritted his teeth and clamped his fists to his temples. Joseph had not seen him like this before. 'Beliefs, opinions, statistics – why does nobody know what they want any more? Why can't they agree? *Why can I not see what to do?*'

This last came out as an anguished howl, and Joseph felt the crowd's reaction of disbelief and trepidation.

The Klansmen exchanged a glance, and their spokesman cleared his throat nervously. 'We aren't asking for much. Just a proclamation from you. Can you do that, sir?'

The Patriarch raised his head, but kept his fists clenched. Fire flashed in his eyes. 'Be gone with you! Take your imponderables elsewhere. Go on, leave, before I incinerate you all!'

A pure white electrical bolt stabbed out of his fingers and struck the bridge between the hooded men. They backed away quickly, until they had reached a safe enough distance to turn their backs and run. Scattered applause broke out in the crowd, but it was subdued by the heavy silence of the majority.

'A liberty, that's what it is, all this "cruel and unusual punishment" crap. That kid should've died for what he did to my wife, and what does he get? A few years in some crummy prison and he's out to do it all over again. There's only one way to stop his kind and that's to exterminate 'em. I asked the gods to strike him down in his cosy little cell, I did, but would they? Would they hell! They didn't have a clue what to do, so they did nothin'. Nothin'! That's what's wrong with this

country I'm tellin' ya: people sittin' back and doin' nothing, lettin' these kids, these hooligans, and the bleedin' heart liberals take over. They don't know right from wrong no more. And what's the point in havin' gods if they won't tell 'em, eh? That's what I wanna know.'

'There will be no more of this,' roared the Patriarch. He glared at the two trembling figures before him. 'You ask me to adjudicate between you. Then I shall do so, but you shall learn the price of invoking the wrath of the gods to decide your petty dispute.'

Joseph realised, too late, what he intended to do.

'General! General Marchant!'

Smythe barged into the general's office, interrupting his discussion with the Doctor. Marchant drew breath to remonstrate with the wretched man, but Smythe got in first.

'They've killed again! The gods. They've – they've killed another man!'

The Doctor leapt to his feet. 'I beg your pardon?'

'It's true, sir,' piped up the radio operator whom, Marchant saw only now, had been beaten to the door by the overexcited Smythe. 'As near as our operative can tell –'

'It was some dispute between neighbours,' chirped Smythe. 'The Patriarch decided who was in the wrong and shouted something about invoking the Wrath of God. He struck him down with a thunderbolt, there and then!'

'Private?'

The operator nodded his confirmation. 'That's what the report said, sir.'

'There was nothing but a wisp of smoke left. Now do you see what I've been saying?'

'What I see, Smythe, is that you have disobeyed my orders!'

'You've got to wipe these people out before it happens again,' insisted Smythe, as if the general had not spoken. 'They're killers!'

The Doctor was ashen. 'It appears I have miscalculated.'

'And it appears to me,' said Marchant brusquely 'that these creatures are even more shaken than we had hoped. They're playing into our hands. Who will believe in them now?'

'That's not the point,' said the Doctor acidly. 'An innocent life has been lost.'

‘A casualty of war. Regrettable, yes, but a life sacrificed for the long-term good.’ It was difficult for Marchant to feel bad about the fate of one fool, when he had been waiting for a breakthrough like this.

The Doctor shook his head emphatically. ‘So, you want people to see these gods as instruments of vengeance, hmm? Is that what you want? How confident are you, General Marchant, that they would spare your city, your nation, your world, if they decided to judge it? Because, if you cannot be sure that you deserve to be spared, then neither can they.’

‘Then we strike!’ said Marchant. ‘I can have bombers here in fifteen minutes.’ He made the suggestion out of anger, that the Doctor could seemingly make him wrong about everything. He regretted it as soon as Smythe nodded his agreement.

‘There will be no more deaths,’ the Doctor vowed, his voice cold. ‘I shall have to bring the next stage of my plan forward, that is all.’

‘You can’t mean... but so soon? Before the newspaper article, even?’

The Doctor was resolute. ‘I am well aware of the risk, General Marchant. I am also perfectly prepared to take it. You might think another death, or a dozen deaths, or a hundred deaths, would not matter, but I happen to disagree.’

Despite himself, Marchant had to admire the Doctor’s nobility. But what would it gain him? What would it gain anyone? He was an old man – a bumbling fool in anachronistic costume – and, though he treated the general like a child playing at soldiers, he had yet to take any kind of effective action himself. Now he was preparing to sacrifice his life for nothing, and Marchant no longer even had the confidence to countermand his insane plan.

What could he say, anyway? The Doctor had a way of always appearing to be right. And, if he wasn’t this planet’s best hope, then there was no hope left.

‘Well, something had to be done, you know I suppose it is a bit harsh, but he made my life a misery. I couldn’t go out without him swearing and spitting. He poured gasoline on my path once. And the courts couldn’t do a thing. He just stood up there and lied on the Bible. He said I was persecuting him, can you believe it? Yeah, I suppose I wouldn’t have wanted

him dead, but, I mean, he moved the fence when I was away, you know? I got the police in, but he just laughed at them. We went to the gods because they know everything, you know, and they saw through his lies. I mean, I didn't think they were going to... well, nobody else would do anything, would they? At least I'll get some peace now. You can't know what it's like unless... but, yeah, I was thinking of maybe jail or something, you know? It is a bit harsh.'

Byron Carter ran.

Around him, walls and pillars crumbled. The fountain in the quadrangle toppled and shattered, discharging clear water into cracks in the ground. The floor beneath Carter's feet reared like a tidal wave. He remained upright only because Stanley Emerson caught him.

The private said nothing, but his thin, freckled face spoke of restrained panic and quiet determination. He practically dragged Carter out of the old school building. The breathless biophysicist stammered his gratitude, aware that his taciturn companion had saved his life three times now. Nor was that his only cause for being glad to have found Emerson here.

They stumbled onto the grass of the school's playing field. Carter could not help but look back. The building – the only place in which he had ever felt protected and guided – had been ruined. The duelling giants struggled on, their upper bodies swathed in clouds, their feet wreaking more destruction each time they shifted to gain leverage. Carter did not know what they were: certainly nothing from his conception of Heaven. Representatives of conflicting monotheistic religions? Or of just one, which subscribed to the notion that the Devil might attempt such a brazen attack upon his arch-enemy?

Whatever. They were here. And the consequences of their titanic combat were beginning to spread. Great gouges opened up across the field. Blood welled from the wounded earth. Carter's heart pounded so fast and hard that he felt it might burst out of his ribcage, but Emerson would not let him rest. He took Carter's hand and propelled him onward, deftly avoiding unsafe ground.

There were bloated snakes in the grass, and they hissed accusations at Carter. 'You ssshouldn't be here. Your faith isss not ssstrong enough. You chossse to follow the wrong teachingsss. You believe in a falssse God.' Creations, he

supposed, of a narrow-minded and petty man; someone who could not accept an alternative point of view. And fortified, of course, by Carter's own self-doubt.

This wasn't going to work. It could never work.

'You will be cast out of Heaven.'

Carter blinked away tears and just ran.

'You can't face them on your own,' insisted Smythe, 'you're mad. They'll kill you!'

Marchant took a deep breath and wished he hadn't found himself in agreement, once again, with this infuriating civilian. The Doctor's plan was suicidal. But a small part of Marchant told him that, maybe, just maybe, it could actually work. It could bring an end to this.

Some hope.

The general and the Doctor made their way through the crowd on the Sheep Meadow, Marchant clearing the way with a series of terse commands, Smythe tagged along in their wake. Some people were not happy to see them. There was no outright challenge, but Marchant heard words muttered behind his back: people recalling that the army had driven away the Latter-Day Pantheon once, and wishing all manner of evils upon him if he intended to do so again. He wondered how strong the people's faith in their deities still was. Not as shaken as the Doctor had hoped, perhaps.

'Let me do this,' he said.

'I'm afraid you can't,' said the Doctor.

'I'm the soldier here, Doctor, not you. Look at yourself! You're well past your prime. Smythe's right for once: you can't challenge the gods!'

'Oh, can't I indeed? Now listen here, young man, this body of mine may be wearing a little thin, but my mind is as sharp as it ever was and that is the important thing.'

'I won't let you do it. You're too important. We need you.'

'Then it is fortunate I do not intend to die, is it not? Steven! Steven, my boy!' The Doctor was calling to one of the gods' volunteers. Marchant realised he had deliberately chosen this section of the Sheep Meadow because his friend was working it.

'Are you going to get my money off them?' asked Smythe. The Doctor ignored him.

'I thought I gave you a job to do, mister,' said Marchant, not for the first time.

Smythe waved him aside as if he was not important. 'I've got my people on it, OK?'

'If you want to help, both of you,' said the Doctor, glancing back over his shoulder as Steven fought his way towards them, 'believe in me.'

He was there again. With Steven and the Doctor and Smythe.

Kathy ought to have ignored him, but she could not look away. He saw her too. They stared at each other, so far apart that the eye contact meant nothing. He looked away first, as the Doctor finished his conversation with Steven and said something to the general. Then Steven and the Doctor left the crowd together and crossed the circle, coming towards her. The general watched them with a concerned expression.

Kathy swore not to look his way again, but she had never stopped. She could fool herself that her attention was on her friends, but he was always there, in the background. It was as if she had become incapable of turning her head.

He had more will power. He acted as if he had not seen her; as if she did not exist.

A satisfied petitioner stepped off the Rainbow Bridge. To Kathy's surprise, the Doctor took his place.

Christ, what was he doing?

She knew the answer to that. He was bringing forward what must have been the next stage of his plan. Determined to prevent more deaths, despite the risk to himself. Just like him, she thought. Funny how she knew that about the Doctor already.

The Doctor halted midway along the Rainbow Bridge, some yards from the gods, as if afraid to approach them. But Joseph sensed no fear in him. He cleared his throat loudly, and Joseph realised that what he had to say was as much for the crowd as for the Pantheon.

'I have a request,' announced the Doctor. 'I would like you to leave this world.'

And a hush fell upon the Sheep Meadow.

The Patriarch laughed, slowly and deliberately. 'You have always opposed our presence here, Doctor. Must we go through this argument once more?'

'I have been proved right, have I not? You have killed again!'

He emphasised that final word, and Joseph felt its disconcerting effect upon the crowd. But many were still faithful. Some wanted to cry out, to hurl insults at this man who would come between them and their deities. They did not dare.

‘You have become all I suspected you would. You are arrogant and wilful. You will bring destruction upon yourselves. I intend to ensure that you do not lay this world to waste too.’

‘Ha!’ the Patriarch snorted. He took a step forward, bringing his sandalled foot down hard upon the shimmering surface of the bridge. Such was the force of the gesture that the first few rows of the crowd shrank away as the Patriarch squared up to his challenger. ‘You are very concerned about this world, Doctor, for one who is alien to it.’

‘Ah yes, I see, I see. You hope to turn these people against me by invoking a xenophobic reaction, hmm? Then, perhaps, "all-father", you would like to expound upon your own origins for us. I think we would all like to hear them.’

‘We are their gods!’

‘No. These people have made you their gods. But there was a time before that, was there not?’ The Doctor smiled. ‘Well? Nothing to say? The mighty all-father of the Latter-Day Pantheon, tongue-tied because he cannot bring himself to utter the simple truth?’

‘Father, no!’

This time, Joseph saw the signs. He threw himself at the Patriarch, even as he gathered energy to strike. He was shrugged off easily. The all-father rounded on him, ablaze with fury. ‘Can you not see?’ Joseph pleaded. ‘You must not do this. You must not kill. It is what the Doctor wants.’

The Patriarch’s anger was mixed with bewilderment. Joseph sensed his thoughts. Why would somebody throw away their life in such a manner?

And the crowd... the crowd had seen their gods fighting amongst themselves.

The Doctor had reached the foot of the bridge, walking slowly, leaning on his cane, his back resolutely turned to the Gateway.

And the Patriarch sensed what he had done – the crisis of faith that he had engendered – and was blinded by rage. ‘*Doctor!*’

The old man turned. And smiled.

And was engulfed by a fireball, fully three times his size.
Joseph could do nothing but watch, in open-mouthed
horror.

People started to scream.

Chapter Thirteen

HEAVEN HELP US

'I've been worshipping Satan for a decade,' Martin Crawford told a New York court, 'but never once has he manifested himself and struck a bargain for my immortal soul. I thought this was an ideal way to get into his good books.'

Crawford was charged with offenses of public indecency and cruelty to animals after he rampaged through a women's health club, naked and smeared in goat's blood, whilst brandishing a crucifix upside-down. He claimed his actions arose from the New York 'gods' hoax of ten years ago. 'The gods are real, you know,' he stated. 'They allowed me to go to Heaven, but I hated it. I was lucky to escape. I've no intention of going back there for eternity, and, the way I see it, there's only one other option.'

Crawford was sent for psychiatric evaluation. 'I've done it, haven't I?' he boasted as he was taken down. 'The gods won't forgive me for this in a hurry.'

'Barmy Old World', The Voyeur, August 23, 1975

Once upon a time, there was a pretty young princess called Dorothea, who lived in a castle with her mummy and daddy, the King and Queen. They saw to it that she had the finest of everything, and, though they loved her, they gave her the freedom to roam the kingdom on her own. She enjoyed exploring the magical woods and the city of clouds, or spending time with the unicorns and centaurs in the verdant fields. Sometimes, she had grand adventures and really wasn't scared at all. And, though the fact that she was dead bothered her slightly, Princess Dorothea did not mind because Heaven was such a nice place to be.

Once upon a time, Dodo Chaplet woke beneath satin sheets in a four-poster bed, not knowing where she was. A man sat patiently at the bed's foot. Recalling that his name was Joseph, Dodo felt the stirring of an unspeakable horror in her

gut. It dissipated in a warm glow. The princess wondered what had caused it. Perhaps she had had a bad dream. After all, Joseph was her fiancé: a kind and pleasant man, whom she loved very much. And Joseph was a god. That was why Princess Dorothea was so favoured; why even her parents envied her.

Joseph coaxed her into wakefulness with a kiss on the back of her hand. He turned his back as she rose and dressed; ever the gentleman. The princess chose a white gown with silver trimmings. It had not been in her wardrobe yesterday, so the fairies must have sewn it during the night. She whispered a polite thank you to them. The princess liked to dress up.

Extending an arm, Joseph escorted the princess downstairs to the banqueting hall. They took a circuitous route so that they could explore more of the castle's labyrinthine corridors. Today, the princess discovered an old-fashioned toy room. She laughed as she frittered away twenty minutes rocking back and forth on a gorgeous painted wooden horse.

Through a glassless window on the stairs, she waved to her pony, Thumper, as he grazed in the field below. He waved back merrily

'Ah, good morning, Princess Dorothea,' the Royal Family's silver-haired wizard hailed her in the plush surroundings of the grand hallway. He feigned a look of consternation. 'Now hold on a moment, young lady, just what do we have here, hmm?' He reached into her right ear and plucked out a lovely white dove. It fluttered in his tender grip. 'Ah, I suspected as much,' he said with a glint in his eye, 'yes I thought so. Indeed.' The princess giggled as the wizard hobbled away, smiling absently as if he had forgotten her already.

When she turned back to her fiancé, her spirits were quashed by his troubled expression. 'What is it, Joseph?' asked the princess. 'What's wrong?'

'I am merely concerned for you, my love.'

'For me?' She laughed. 'Oh, don't be a silly billy. I'm happy.'

'Is this what you want?'

'Of course. All my life.'

'To be so different?'

Princess Dorothea (Dodo?) scowled and wanted to cover her ears. 'From what?' she asked sullenly, and denied that

she could know the answer. A distant crash registered dimly in her brain. It didn't seem to be part of the dream, so she ignored it.

Dream?

'From what you were. You have changed so much, Dorothea. Your clothes, your home, your very appearance. Were you so unhappy with your life? With yourself?'

'Does it matter?'

'It matters if your happiness is cosmetic; if you have not found true contentment.'

'I have!' the princess (Dodo) insisted, to herself as much as to him.

Joseph smiled, and the princess felt that everything was all right again. 'Good. Then all is as I hoped. In which case, Dorothea, I would like you to stay here for ever. I would like you to stay with me.' He took her hands in his, and gazed earnestly into her eyes.

The princess felt butterflies in her stomach. 'You don't mean —?'

'It is time we formalised our love for each other. I would like to ask the Patriarch for his permission to wed as soon as is possible.'

This time, there was no ignoring the sounds of destruction and battle and death. Dorothea (Dodo!) realised they had been going on for some minutes. Brushing past Joseph, she ran to the great doors of the banqueting hall and yanked them open.

Her jaw dropped at the scene of chaos within.

Red knights had invaded Princess Dorothea's castle. They poured into the hall through a gaping hole in the wall. The black knights of the Royal Family had formed a protective cordon around the King and Queen, to fight a defensive action. The air rang with the sound of clashing swords and shields. Tables had been upturned, pots shattered, food and corpses spread across the floor so that red wine and red blood mingled.

'No,' cried Dorothea. 'Stop it! You're ruining my castle!' She started forward, convinced that force of will alone would put things right. She had always got what she wanted before. She screamed as a red knight pinned her against the wall. She could see only his eyes through the narrow slit of his helmet.

‘The little princess,’ he sneered. ‘Living up here in luxury. There is no class distinction in Heaven, darling. You’re like the rest of us now.’

‘But – but –’ Dorothea protested through tears. ‘It was only a fairy tale.’

The red knight drew back his sword and made ready to strike.

‘Joseph!’ Dodo screamed.

Once upon a time, a Holy War broke out in Heaven.

The sword struck, and Dodo fell. She could feel a hot bruise forming on her left shoulder. Her arm had gone numb. It took her a moment to realise that the knight had used only the flat of his blade. Had he wanted to, he could have slain her. He might yet.

Her vision misted by tears, and unable to focus on anything through the chaos anyway, Dodo hauled herself along the floor with her knees and her good arm, looking for concealment in a swaying forest of armoured legs. She started as a helmet crashed to the floor, an inch from her nose. She shrieked as its visor fell open to reveal the staring eyes of a decapitated head.

Where was Joseph?

Dodo leapt to her feet and found herself surrounded by stabbing, slicing blades again. But, now, she was closer to the hole. Escape. She put her head down, covered it with her hands and barged through the mêlée, just hoping to survive through blind fortune. She was kicked and punched and knocked, but not seriously hurt. She felt a surge of relief as she reached the outside world at last. It was quashed in a second.

A car stood outside the castle. Dodo did not question the incongruity of it. It was a square-backed vehicle, bottle green, with a wooden frame. An old Morris Minor. A familiar one. Its engine was running. Dodo ran towards it, fighting down a feeling of dread. Her mother was inside, no longer wearing her royal robes but dressed instead in the beige frock and fur coat in which Dodo had last seen her before she had left for the final time. Dodo hammered on the window, and her mother wound it down and smiled at her.

‘Don’t worry Dorry dear. Mummy’s only going to Aunt Margaret’s. She’ll be back.’

'No, Mummy, you won't,' cried Dodo, feeling like she was four years old again (and why, when this had happened so much later?). 'No, you won't come back. Don't go! I won't let you go!'

'Don't be silly, dear,' her mother said. And then she was slipping away, sliding past little Dorry as she put her car into gear and allowed it to glide over the grass.

'Mummy!' Dorry strained to hold the car back, to do something. The vehicle broke free from her grasp and she ran after it, hopelessly. '*Mummy!*'

And then, just as Dorry thought she might actually catch the vehicle, she was enveloped in blackness and an icy chill descended upon her shoulders. She floundered about, lost, until the darkness withdrew, forming itself into a shape before her A humanoid shape. A cloak that seemed to leech light from around it. A skull, in which pearly teeth grinned maliciously. A scythe, dulled and reddened by use.

'There is nothing you can do, girl,' cackled the Grim Reaper. 'The gods have seen your happiness, and we will not allow it to be. You must learn your place.'

And then, with a stale breath of wind, the figure was gone, the car was lying on its back with fire roaring from its engine, and Dodo sank to her knees and wept until there was only a gutted shell left and she had run out of tears to shed.

'This isn't real, Miss Chaplet,' said a voice at her shoulder. Professor Carter. Of course, he had entered the Land of the Gods before her. 'Keep telling yourself, it's not real.'

Dodo looked at him and tried to smile. The young soldier from the church, Private Emerson, was by his side. So the gods had brought him here too? 'I know,' she said. But, still, there was a yawning chasm in her stomach She had not felt like this – so sick, so empty – since – since the last time she had lost her mother.

'I know,' she said again, swallowing to prevent a fresh spring of tears from erupting. 'It was just a dream. A silly, childhood dream.' And one that had turned into a childhood nightmare.

'A little more than that,' Carter cautioned her. 'Here, our dreams become real, and they can kill. As can the dreams of others.'

Marchant had expected to find the Doctor in bed. By now, he ought to have known better. As he stood helplessly in the

private hospital room, staring at crisp, apparently unused sheets, the old man appeared, fully clothed, in the doorway behind him and bade him good morning.

'You look better,' said the general, because it was all he could think of to say. When last he had seen the alien, his face had been red and burnt. He had shared the crowd's astonishment as the Patriarch's fireball had died, to reveal the defiant form of his unbeaten foe, his clothes charred and his silver hair streaked with soot but still alive and still standing.

The Doctor merely waved a dismissive hand. 'Little more than psychosomatic wounds,' he said. Marchant noticed that even his coat appeared to have knitted itself back together.

'You took one hell of a risk out there,' said Marchant, with as much admiration as admonishment.

'Perhaps, perhaps,' said the Doctor, sinking heavily into a chair 'but I certainly believed the Patriarch could not harm me. The only risk was that the crowd's belief in him might have outweighed my own in myself. Fortunately, and thanks to the work we have done so far, that was not the case.'

Marchant remembered how the Doctor had looked the previous evening, his face twisted into an angry sneer. 'You cannot silence me, Patriarch!' he had proclaimed. 'You have no power here any more. Your nature is exposed and, I swear to you, I will see you destroyed!'

And, in that moment, the general had believed him.

'No, my one regret,' said the Doctor, leaning back and steepling his fingers, 'is that my challenge was not successful enough. Oh, it sent the Patriarch slinking back through his Gateway yesterday all right, but he will be back, make no mistake about it, and he will have a plan to re-establish his position. We must be prepared.'

'But the gods retreated! Surely the threat is all but over now?'

'No, not a bit of it, young man. No, quite to the contrary, this is when they will be at their most dangerous. Decent and honest people are turning away from them. Their actions now will be shaped by the thoughts and dreams of their remaining followers.'

'So, what do we do?'

'I think,' said the Doctor, slowly and with visible reluctance, 'I think it is almost time to call in your armed forces after all.'

Dodo and Carter found respite atop a grassy hill, where the sun was hot and the breeze sweet. Below them, thunder ripped the sky, rain lashed down upon the plains and the war continued, as infinite armies clashed with jangling force. From here, they looked like swarms of ravenous red and black ants, razing their own world. Massive cannons had been wheeled up to the battlefield. Their fire had demolished Princess Dorothea's castle. Smoke drifted lazily from its ruins. She felt a terrible sense of loss.

Carter spoke wistfully, his eyes focused upon some distant, invisible wonder. 'This place used to be so marvellous. So marvellous, I can hardly describe it. Colours, shifting and changing. Singing, so melodic and haunting. I saw this world as it really was, Miss Chaplet. The planet of the gods.'

'Planet?' Dodo frowned. She had not thought in quite those terms before.

Carter nodded. 'They're aliens, of course. Beautiful, ghostlike aliens. Like sheets of gossamer. I caught a glimpse of them before —' He clenched his fists and set his lips into a thin line, as if the memory was painful. 'I was the first human being to come here, Miss Chaplet. They read our thoughts. They shape themselves into what we wish to see.'

She nodded eagerly. 'Yes, the Doctor said something like that.'

'Did he?' Carter sighed. 'I should have listened to the Doctor. I should have followed my own faith.'

'He said the gods were only gods at all because we wished them to be.'

'And they have sent us to their home, because it is what we expected them to do. And look at what we have done to it. Oh, it wasn't so bad at first: saints, angels with harps, loved ones reincarnated. But more people have come through the Gateway, and each one expects instant perfection. *Their* perfection. These beings cannot cope. They are torn apart by everyone's conflicting ideas of what Paradise should be.'

'This would happen on Earth too, wouldn't it?' said Dodo.

'Eventually, I think, yes. When enough people believe and start to think, really think, about what the gods can do for them.'

She nodded, beginning to understand at last. She glanced at Private Emerson, and was struck by the haunted look in his eyes. 'He's not real, is he?' she said, lowering her voice

as if afraid to let him hear. Not real. Not alive. Like her mother.

'We hoped to find him here. We wanted to see that death is not the end.'

'He's really gone.'

'I believe he lives on. Somewhere. Not here.'

Emerson – the ersatz Emerson – tilted his head to one side inquisitively. 'Go on,' said Carter. 'Go. We don't need you any more.'

The being did not move.

'Do you understand? We want you to be yourself. That's all we want.'

Slowly, ever so slowly, the being climbed to his feet and turned around. Dodo felt terrible as he walked away, like she had just told a young boy that he could not play with his friends any more. She almost called him back, but Carter was steadfast.

And, as the being that had taken the shape of Stanley Emerson walked slowly down the hill, Dodo thought she saw his body blurring and the merest hint of a wispy, near-transparent ghost seeping from its prison of expectations to reclaim its freedom.

Then it was gone, and the sounds of battle imposed themselves upon her ears once more.

'He will find other thoughts to latch on to,' said Carter. 'He will become something else. Our kind will not let him rest.'

'It won't end, will it? Not until this place is destroyed.' A thought struck Dodo. 'And Earth too. It's all going to end like this. Professor Carter, the Doctor was right! We have to get back and do something. We have to get rid of the gods. They're going to destroy our world!'

'No.' Carter shook his head sadly. 'Not them.'

Joseph walked across the battlefield, untouched but for the tumult in his heart.

He did not understand. He did not know why the Patriarch had retreated from the Doctor, nor what that said about the all-father: his nature, his powers and his motives. He did not know if he fitted into his new family any more. Nor did the Land of the Gods provide its usual solace. Though only a few favoured humans resided in this place, they had brought it to chaos. Was it what they desired? If so, he had misjudged them.

Joseph needed somebody to explain it all to him. He needed Dorothea.

He located her atop a nearby hill, with Byron Carter. He landed softly by her side and smiled at her. She was not pleased to see him. She reacted with a frustrating mixture of emotions. Why did humans have to be so ambiguous?

‘What is wrong with you?’ Joseph was surprised to hear a bitter snap in his voice.

Dorothea was incredulous. ‘You abandoned me!’

‘I do not understand.’

‘At the castle. That knight was about to kill me!’

‘The scenario, for the most part, was of your own devising. It was under your control.’

‘Do you think I wanted to die?’

‘I do not understand,’ cried Joseph again. ‘Always, when I try to help, it is wrong. When I do nothing, this too is wrong. I need to understand!’

Dorothea’s expression softened.

‘She cannot help you,’ Byron Carter interceded. ‘The human mind is a complex thing. Even we do not fully understand it.’

‘How do you endure?’

‘Through experience. Through acceptance of what is.’

‘I cannot accept this confusion!’

‘You must! There are no answers.’

‘Dorothea!’ Joseph turned away from Carter. He did not want to hear what the scientist had to say. His special friend was here. She would make everything right. ‘Dorothea, I need you by my side. We have talked of marriage before. I would go now to the Patriarch and ask his leave for our union to receive his blessing.’

‘Oh, Joseph...’ She was flattered. Doubtful. Scared. He had hoped for more.

‘This isn’t going to help!’ protested Carter.

‘Dorothea?’

Dorothea thought for a moment longer, then smiled as all trace of doubt finally left her. She emanated only forgiveness and love now, and she replied softly: ‘I would like that, Joseph. I accept your kind proposal.’

‘Are you calling me a liar? You’re impugning my professional reputation. I’ll have you know I have never been so insulted!’

The voice belonged to Alexander Lullington-Smythe. It crackled out of Kathy's tiny radio set, over which she and Steven huddled, hoping that the sound of Thursday's breakfast news would not carry out of the small tent and to the other, loyal, servants of the gods.

'But it is a matter of record, is it not Mr Lullington-Smythe, that you have appeared in court on more than one occasion?'

'Listen here, you microbe! I am the manager of the gods. Their manager, do you hear? If you don't stop this line of questioning, I'll – I'll get them to strike you down dead!'

Steven shook his head in despair. 'The man's deranged!'

'No,' said Kathy. 'He's a genius!'

Steven frowned. 'I thought you didn't like this Smythe bloke?'

'I don't. But this is perfect. I mean, listen.'

The interview had ended. The newsreader was summing up with a few choice remarks about the veracity of what had been said.

'He's on our side, remember, after what the gods did to him. So he's pretending he's still their manager and using his own lack of popularity to make people believe it's all a con.' It was brilliant. Kathy had never imagined that Smythe had it in him.

'So between this, and the Doctor's little speech last night and the *New York Ranger* today...' Steven indicated the paper, which lay open between them. Kathy's story had taken the front page and two pages inside. She had pulled no punches, writing exactly what the Doctor had asked her to.

'I'd say it's almost over.'

'Almost,' agreed Steven. 'The question is, what happens next?'

'I don't follow.'

'Well, no matter what the media says, no matter what people see, there'll always be someone who believes. We've been sowing doubts about *Götterdämmerung* and what-have-you, but surely the Doctor's going to have to make it happen?'

Kathy didn't like the sound of that. 'Do you think so?'

'I think he's been working with the army for a reason.'

She turned off the radio with a sigh, and looked at the newspaper again. 'This is only the beginning, isn't it?'

‘We’ve weakened the gods; we’re evening things up. But, yes, in the end, I think it’s going to come down to open conflict.’

‘And we’ll be caught smack in the centre of the war zone.’

‘Along with several hundred other people.’

The ceremony had been arranged with indecent haste. A transparent dome was erected in a secluded glen. Either the chaos had not reached this spot, or it had been held back by the gods. Outside, the sky was clear. Bluebirds fluttered through lush green leaves.

Carter perched on a curved, white, plastic chair and fiddled uncomfortably with his tie. His last memory was of Joseph’s proposal. No sooner had it been made, then Carter had found himself here, with no sense of transition at all.

There were eleven other spectators, but Carter did not recognise them. Perhaps some of the beings had shaped themselves into wedding guests, because wedding guests were required. One woman was dressed in royal finery. He deduced that Dorothea Chaplet’s illusory mother had returned for her big day.

This was dreadfully wrong. But what could he do?

An unseen organist launched into the Wedding March, but played it like a dirge: Carter’s own contribution to the scenario, he supposed. He knew he ought to protest, to stop this charade, but it was all happening too quickly and he did not have the courage to defy the... the beings that were like gods.

Joseph manifested himself before a gleaming white altar. He noticed that he was wearing a smart black suit, with a – oh, what would Neville Albert Miller have called this ludicrous strip of material? – a bow-tie knotted around his neck. The Patriarch stood in front of him, elevated by two steps and clad in white robes. Behind the all-father, Max, Jennifer and Dennis watched with beatific expressions and unspoken good wishes.

Behind him, Norman stood with the ring. As the best man, his job would be to ensure that things progressed in an orderly fashion.

Joseph beamed at the sight of Dorothea Chaplet, being escorted up the makeshift aisle by her father, the King. She wore a beautiful white dress, with lace frills and a flowing

train. If her expression betrayed a lack of enthusiasm – or, indeed, of any emotion at all – then Joseph did not see, or did not want to know. Dorothea stopped by his side, where she would remain for ever.

The bluebirds flew closer. Many rested on the dome itself. They sang happily, and their song reverberated like joyous wedding bells and drowned out the cynical discords of a single guest. Centaurs rode into the glen and observed from afar. This was quite an event in Heaven. A princess was marrying a god. The god was about to become whole.

‘My son,’ said the Patriarch, ‘I understand it is your wish to take this human girl as your bride.’

‘It is, Father.’

‘And you intend for her to reside with you in the Land of the Gods.’

‘Yes, Father.’

‘To be your servant and companion; your touchstone to the world of humans.’

‘I do.’

‘And it is your desire that this woman, this Dorothea Chaplet, be made over like us, so that her mortal bloom will not wither on the vine of time and return you to your solitude.’

‘I love her, Father, and I wish to be with her for eternity.’

‘You have asked for my blessing of this union. Such blessing I shall happily give. Joseph, you may take this human as your bride. I pronounce you –’

‘Doesn’t Miss Chaplet have a say in this?’

The interruption struck like a knife to Joseph’s heart. Before he turned, he knew that it was Byron Carter who had spoken. Why had he let the cursed man attend this ceremony?

Because he was Dorothea’s closest friend in Heaven, that was why.

Carter’s trembling legs and shaking hands would have betrayed his nervous state, even had Joseph been unable to sense it. It had taken a lot for him to speak up. He had had to believe that there was no other choice. Carter dreaded the Patriarch’s anger, and it occurred to Joseph that it was not right for a man so virtuous to live in such fear of his gods.

And why should he not be scared of the Patriarch? The all-father’s face had darkened; his voice rumbled with the all too familiar onset of a divine rage. ‘And by what right do you interrupt this sacred ceremony?’

Carter swallowed. 'By your leave, My Lord, I am Miss Chaplet's friend, and I do not believe she wishes to go through with this.'

'If she did not,' said the Patriarch dismissively, 'then it would not occur.'

'I'm sorry,' said Carter, 'but I don't think that's true any more.'

And heavy grey clouds drifted over the sky.

Carter addressed Joseph. 'You can see it, can't you? If you look, that is. I think you're a good man, Joseph, but that is precisely what you have become now: a man You have grown. You have thoughts, feelings, desires, of your own I think you are following these, regardless of what Miss Chaplet wants. Just look at her, Joseph. She is not thinking for herself. She is acting as you require. You are doing to her what we humans have done to you.'

'I... want this wedding to proceed,' said Joseph uncertainly.

'Then proceed it shall!' the Patriarch proclaimed. 'We shall eject this human from the Land of the Gods; cast him into the pits of Hell for his presumption.'

'No!' Joseph could almost have cried. Byron Carter had been right. He would never be rid of his confusion. The knowledge that it would torture him for ever turned like a corkscrew in his guts, and the part of his mind that was still Neville Albert Miller reminded him that life was never easy.

'No,' said Joseph again. 'Byron Carter was right to have spoken to me thus. It is not my desire to cause Dorothea hurt, and yet this is what I would have done in my blindness.'

'It is your desire to marry her,' said the Patriarch.

'Not if it cannot be her desire also.'

'I tire of this! You vacillate as do the ungrateful wretches of Earth!'

'I am beginning to understand them, Father.'

It was the wrong thing to say. 'I accepted you into my family, boy, and yet you are not prepared to follow my teachings. If you would prefer to walk amongst humans, then perhaps that is what I should allow you to do. You can walk amongst them, as one of them.'

Was that what Joseph wanted? Humans like Dorothea seemed to carry the burden of self easily. They did not feel the heavy responsibility of having to make decisions for everybody's sake. And how much closer might Dorothea and

Joseph become, if they were of the same kind; if she was no longer afraid of him?

Joseph thought about all this for only a second, but it was a second too long. The Patriarch saw his temptation and was angered further. With a terrible roar, he called down thunder and lightning bolts. The transparent dome was shattered; the centaurs stampeded and the bluebirds flapped their wings in desperate attempts to escape, as many were slaughtered. Joseph screamed as the fury of the elements centred itself upon him. Tumbling to his knees, he writhed in indescribable pain.

It was over in seconds. The glen had been turned into a volcanic plain of glassy, scorched earth. Byron Carter and Dorothea Chaplet had been bowled off their feet. Dorothea blinked and seemed confused, as if waking from a long sleep. The rest of the wedding guests had either vanished or fled.

Joseph reached out to Dorothea's mind, hoping to feel that she was all right. He sensed nothing. Not from her. Not from Carter. Not from the Patriarch, nor from the lesser gods. He had been cut off; his mind imprisoned in his own brain. His powers had been sapped from him. The Patriarch had done as he had threatened. He had made Joseph human. He had severed him, both physically and emotionally, from the family that had loved him; had given him a purpose and a place in life and a reason for living. Joseph cried, because he knew then that he had not wanted this at all.

'This only leaves the matter of the people of Earth,' the Patriarch rumbled, 'and I swear this: they shall learn to respect their gods – to obey me – or I will destroy them!'

Smythe's interview was repeated on the eight o'clock news. By now, there were radios all over the Sheep Meadow, many of them provided by soldiers posing as concerned followers. Copies of the *New York Ranger* were in circulation too. More than one person had asked Steven for reassurance. His stock answer was: 'I don't know. I'm beginning to believe what people are saying myself.'

The crowd was noticeably smaller than it had been yesterday. Steven estimated there were barely a hundred people left.

At ten minutes past eight, a hushed silence fell as the Patriarch and four of his lesser gods marched through the Gateway, ahead of schedule.

'You don't suppose they know, do you?' Kathy hissed in Steven's ear.

'They've got something planned, that's for sure. Stay behind me.'

The Patriarch took up a position midway along the Rainbow Bridge. He seemed taller than ever. 'Citizens of Earth,' he addressed the crowd, in a voice that did not sound friendly, 'devotees of the Church of the Latter-Day Pantheon: your gods are displeased.'

A distant peal of thunder underscored his words. A frightened murmur ran through the crowd, and several people backed away. Steven felt an inexplicable chill.

'We have offered you everything, and you have responded with only pettiness, uncertainty and disbelief. I am disappointed in my creations. Only my Gods of Order and Free Love have dissuaded me from devolving this world back to the clay from whence it was fashioned.'

Steven had never thought of that before. Might the strength of belief in Central Park be enough to allow the gods to simply unmake the world?

'I am merciful enough,' the Patriarch continued, 'to grant humanity one final chance. I shall prove my divinity beyond doubt, and then I will require your worship.' He spat the word 'require', and made it an unmistakable threat.

'I tire of being asked to intervene in minor squabbles and hardships. We have come here to save your world, to remake it into the place of beauty that it was meant to be. To this end, it is past time we took decisive action.'

'I don't like the sound of this,' Kathy muttered.

'A bloody and protracted struggle rages in the country known to you as Vietnam. My gods and I will travel there, and we shall end that struggle, in the only way that it can end: by eradicating the Communist warmongers from the face of the globe!'

In the midst of the crowd, somebody cheered.

People began to clap, hesitantly at first.

And, within moments, the Sheep Meadow rang to the sound of deafening applause and shouts of encouragement, as the Patriarch basked in his newly restored adulation.

'You were right,' said Steven grimly. 'We've just run out of time.'

Chapter Fourteen

GÖTTERDÄMMERUNG [extract]

We all know what happened to the Gods of Myth. With the might of the American people against them, how can these craven impostors hope to fare better?

New York Ranger, Thursday April 1, 1965

‘You must give the order.’

General Marchant was not listening. He was thinking of the Patriarch’s vow; of the long, pointless war in Vietnam and of the American lives that could be spared if it was brought to an end. It was tempting, so tempting, to let the gods do something for him for once. For his country. For the world. Wasn’t it his patriotic duty?

‘General!’ snapped the Doctor. ‘You must give the order now!’

‘I’m thinking!’

‘About allowing those beings to commit genocide?’

‘About stopping a war!’

‘Then you are falling into the same trap as are the people down there,’ the Doctor shouted, pointing angrily at the Sheep Meadow through the office window ‘What do you think will happen if you allow the gods to do this, hmm? You won’t be able to keep their fame localised any longer. They will feature on every news broadcast the world over. You will give them all the belief and power they could hope for – and how do you think they will use that power, if they have achieved their aims by ending human lives? Well?’

Marchant gritted his teeth. ‘I know, Doctor. But you *must* see –’

‘I only see that we must end this,’ the Doctor growled. ‘Now. Because, next time, General Marchant, those beings might ask their questions of another audience. They might side against you, and there won’t be a blessed thing you can do about it. Give the order, General, and do it now – before they take over your world!’

The sky was red. The ground was black and barren. A biting wind reached into Dodo's overcoat and cut through the black dress from the Doctor's travelling machine. Her head felt muzzy and, though she knew vaguely how she had come to be here, it did not feel right. She felt as if her life had become a Saturday morning movie serial, only she'd been larking about on the back seat during the last episode and had caught only the gist of the story.

Had she really intended to marry Joseph?

Professor Carter was talking to the former God of Peace. To Dodo, the words sounded distant and indistinct. She made herself tune in to them.

'- around you, just look! Our races must not be allowed to meet. This is what happens. We are destroying you and you will destroy us.'

Joseph muttered something that Dodo did not catch, to which Carter responded: 'We have to round up everybody – every human being – in the Land of the Gods, and get them out of here. Can you do it, Joseph? Can you find us a way back?'

'I believe so,' said Joseph, with a sad little nod.

'Gods and humans,' said Dodo dully, beginning to understand as the clouds fell away from her mind. 'We have to separate them.'

Carter smiled. 'That's right, Miss Chaplet. Welcome back.'

'Just give me a sec, I need to get my bearings. Then I'll help.'

'Dorothea,' said Joseph. 'I am sorry for what I have done.'

She didn't know how to answer him. She couldn't be angry with Joseph. Even now, the thought that she might not see him again caused an ache in her stomach. Was he still a god, or was he human now? When the two races each returned to their homes, on which side of the divide would he fall? Did he even have a home any more?

These questions chased each other through Dodo's thoughts. She asked another instead. 'How about Earth? How do we get the Patriarch and the others away from there?'

'I'm afraid I don't know,' said Carter sombrely. 'We can only do our best for this world, and hope that your friend the Doctor can come up with a way of saving ours.'

‘He can,’ said Dodo definitely. ‘The Doctor can do anything, I’m sure of it.’

But she crossed her fingers behind her back, for luck.

‘It’s happening.’

Steven heard it first: the insistent whine of aircraft engines. It took him a moment to locate its source. They were flying out of the sun, just three of them. He couldn’t identify the type, but he knew they were early fighter planes. They looked positively archaic to him: bulky and heavy yet fragile. He doubted they could ever be effective against the gods. But the people of this era had seen nothing better. They believed in the destructive capability of their primitive weapons. That was all that mattered.

They came in low over the Sheep Meadow; so low that Steven wanted to duck. Many people did, or threw themselves to the ground. Some fled, their loyalty to the gods found wanting by the prospect of personal harm.

Steven looked at the Patriarch, who seemed isolated and lonely in the middle of the Rainbow Bridge. He saw a flicker of fear on the all-father’s face.

Then the fear was replaced by fury. And, as one, five gods rose to meet their challengers.

The fighters opened fire. The Patriarch staggered as bullets strafed his broad chest. But he was not defeated. He righted himself and hurled a roiling black ball of fire at his attacker. But his movements were sluggish and the plane had already banked sharply out of his sights. The gods had been weakened by lack of faith. But they could still win.

Steven tore his eyes from the battle and tugged on Kathy’s sleeve until she did likewise. She looked at him and nodded. They had a job to do.

Marchant’s men were already moving through the crowd. Steven heard such exclamations as: ‘They’ll never survive!’ and ‘They’re having trouble with just three planes. What happens when the whole Air Force comes after them?’ And the call was taken up, by those who had previously believed.

More soldiers – uniformed, this time – swept onto the Sheep Meadow. Voices distorted by bullhorns called out orders to evacuate the park. Steven grabbed paralysed spectators by the scruffs of their necks and yelled at them to comply. He made sure that each one saw his armband and knew the favoured position he had once held. ‘The gods can’t

protect you,' he insisted. 'They can't even save themselves. They're done for!' Often, staccato bursts of machine gun fire drowned out his words, but people got the message none the less.

Some fought him off. But many ran for their lives.

'No, you must stay!' Smythe insisted. 'The gods need your help, you can't abandon them; you can't let the army slaughter them!'

'They need *our* help?' someone wailed, and Smythe's entreaties failed to halt the exodus. As he had planned

General Marchant had congratulated him upon his radio interview. 'Big of you to play the patsy like that,' he had grunted. 'Could be effective.' Smythe had accepted the reluctant compliment and had not mentioned that the interview had been taped two days earlier, with the intention of raising the gods' profile and his own. He was proud of himself. Even then, he must have known subconsciously that his former clients would have to be driven out. Why else would he have sent himself up so abominably?

It bothered Smythe a little to have to play to his undeserved public image; to confirm the prejudices of some microbes against him. But it was in a good cause, and, when the record was set straight, he would be a hero. There might even be a medal in it for him.

'Come back!' he shrieked with gusto. 'Come back, and I promise the gods will, er, they'll hand out miracles at cost price, honest. As soon as this, er, setback is behind them.'

The Patriarch took more bullets, but seemed hardly affected. Jennifer and Norman had manoeuvred themselves on to the tail plane of one of their attackers. To Steven's alarm, they wrenched it loose, then flew clear. The stricken aircraft performed a graceless arc and withdrew from the scene. He prayed its pilot could keep from crashing into Manhattan.

The other fighters stepped up their offensive, switching to cannons. A direct hit to Dennis's chest surprised him, at least, and he plummeted to the ground. A collective gasp rose up as he landed heavily on the Sheep Meadow and did not move.

Steven approached him first.

Dennis's eyes flickered open. 'Ouch,' he said.

'This isn't a joke!' exploded Steven. 'Can't you see what's happening here? This battle is endangering innocent lives. People are going to die!'

Dennis glared at him stubbornly 'We did not instigate the conflict. Any deaths will be on the conscience of your race – and on your own, for your part in this.'

'I'm asking you to make an announcement,' persisted Steven. 'Tell your followers to get out of the park. You owe them that much.'

Dennis shook his head. 'Without their faith, we cannot win this war.'

'Is that all you care about?'

Dennis looked at Steven strangely. 'It is my calling.' Then, seeming fully restored now, he took to the sky once more.

And a new sound cut through the clamour: the deep-throated grumbling of another aircraft. The new arrival was bigger, wider and slower than the fighters, and it put Steven in mind of a gigantic bumblebee. It had clearly not been designed for aerial combat. He felt cold inside. It had to be a bomber. 'Not yet,' he whispered to himself, 'not yet.'

Kathy was by his side again. 'What are they doing?' she cried, her voice almost drowned out by the sounds of battle, of panic and of the huge plane as it drew inexorably nearer.

'Ending it,' said Steven numbly. The soldiers were beginning to pull back from the Sheep Meadow. Only twenty or so people remained: the most faithful of the gods' devotees, on their knees and offering prayers to their deities even as those deities fought for their lives above them. Words alone could not move them, and there was no time for anything more. 'Go,' Steven ordered, pushing Kathy away from him. 'You can't do any more here, just run.'

'What about you?'

Steven set his jaw grimly. 'I've got to do something first.'

'Steven!'

He ran towards the Gateway, ignoring Kathy's shout. There were people trapped on its far side. He had to get to them; help them. Before it was too late. Before the Gateway, and all that surrounded it, was destroyed.

How could the Doctor do this? Were the lives of those who remained on the Sheep Meadow less important than his victory? Could nothing be done for the people who were about to die here? Steven couldn't think that way. He had to have faith in the Doctor and his plan.

But that faith was tested as he reached the top end of the Rainbow Bridge and glanced up at the bomber, directly above now and cutting off light from the sun. He froze in horror as the stomach of the aircraft slid open and disgorged a squat, black shape.

'No!' he screamed, but that was all he could do.

All those people. And the soldiers. And Kathy, who couldn't have had time to escape from the blast radius yet. Steven had to do something. There was nothing he could do. Nothing but save himself. He could leap through the Gateway. But how could he abandon all those innocents? No, how could he not? What was the point in dying, if it did not help? What would happen to Dodo Chaplet if he could not reach her? But then, how could he rescue her from the Land of the Gods anyway, if the Doctor was about to destroy its entranceway?

These thoughts and more raced through Steven's mind, as time itself seemed to slow and the bomb drew inexorably closer to the ground. He almost hesitated too long.

In the instant that the bomb struck, Steven let out an anguished howl and hurtled through the Gateway, propelled by fear, determination and guilt.

Later, Dodo would be unable to recall much of what had happened in those final minutes. Events flashed by, often seeming unconnected like a dream. She was clinging to a tree, terrified that a gale might tear its roots from the ground. She was running for the shelter of an abandoned temple as scarlet clouds threatened to rain add upon her head. She was wrestling with red-skinned, horned devils, all desperate to cast her into a pit of fire.

Joseph was always there, to guide her, to protect her. So too was Professor Carter, more confident and purposeful than she had seen him before. As Joseph located this world's human interlopers, one by one, Carter explained the situation to each of them. He kept reminding the ever-growing crocodile of refugees – about fifteen of them now – that their thoughts were controlling the environment. 'Fight it with your minds. Concentrate on getting home.'

But many still believed that they were in Heaven, or Hell, and could never go home.

Mythological beasts attacked. The Hydra hissed something about there being no escape, but the Minotaur

wasted no time on threats. It caught Professor Carter by surprise, with a butt to his stomach. Suddenly, Dodo was alone in the midst of battle, still feeling distanced from it all, one part of her mind marvelling at her race's many and varied interpretations of the afterlife. This one made sense, she supposed, for someone who believed in gods of myth, rather than in the one God to whom she had been made to pray by her great-aunt during so many boring Sunday services.

Dodo began to feel, oddly, that, while she had fidgeted and sighed and stifled yawns throughout those services, she had missed something wonderful.

Then a three-headed dog sprang for her throat, and she collapsed beneath its weight and suddenly felt her senses being pulled back into sharp focus by the prospect of imminent death. She was on her back and could feel the dog's hot breath and saliva on her cheek as she strained to push it away. She entertained the fleeting hope that Joseph would save her, but he had been dragged into the air by a huge dragon with leathery wings and a fiery hide.

Then hands closed around one of the beast's throats and pulled a snarling, spitting head back. Lashing out with its claws, the creature cut a shallow groove across Dodo's stomach. She winced with pain, but managed to scramble out from beneath it.

'Get out of here, Dodo,' cried Steven Taylor, her unexpected saviour. 'Go on, run!' But Dodo was sick of running. With a thought, she was clad in armour and wielding a huge sword. She flexed her arm muscles and the weapon described a smooth arc and scythed through the monster dog's midriff, slicing it in two. As it died, it let out a terrible howl, which was taken up by the other beasts. The sound grated on Dodo's nerves. She lost the resolve that momentary anger and desperation had lent her. The armour and sword faded, and she was defenceless again.

The dog dissolved into a puddle of grey protoplasm, which slunk away. The same fate befell the Minotaur and the dragon and the other beasts. Within seconds, a dozen shaken human beings – the former god Joseph amongst them – were nursing cuts and bites, temporarily safe. One man was sobbing into his knees.

Professor Carter approached Dodo. 'You did it!' he congratulated her warmly. 'You used your mind to defeat those things; let the rest of us see they weren't a threat.'

'They reverted to their true forms,' Steven guessed.

'Or rather, to what you expected their true forms to be.'

Steven shook his head, as if to clear it of confusing thoughts.

'That's not important now. Listen, we've got to get everybody out of here.'

Carter looked at him suspiciously, and Dodo realised why. 'He's real, Professor Carter. Don't ask me how, but I know.'

Carter nodded briskly. 'Very well. We had come to the same conclusion ourselves. We only have one more person to locate.'

They found her at the Gates of Heaven: magnificent structures of intricate golden latticework, more than half a mile high. The middle-aged woman was drifting on a cloud, but weighed down by chains. She refused to go with them. 'You mean to tempt me, but I am not yet done with my penance. I must atone before I can enter the Kingdom of God.'

Steven watched sadly as Carter spoke to the woman and softly disabused her of her deeply held beliefs. As if in response to his mood, it had begun to rain. His thoughts drifted back to the rain on Roylus Prime and to the shattered illusions of its colonists.

He had been thinking about Roylus Prime a lot recently, and so it was with a feeling of inevitability – albeit tinged with dread – that he turned in response to a prickling sensation on his neck and saw her, alone in the deluge. The woman. The one whom he had seen clubbed to death. The one he had not helped.

She pulled back her ragged shawl, and Steven looked into her pleading brown eyes and read the question there: Why didn't you save me? He was lost in those eyes for an eternity. The Land of the Gods and its ever-present dangers faded into nothing, until there was only her.

A hand gripped his shoulder. He was spun around to face Professor Carter. 'Don't give in to it, boy,' the scientist urged. 'Don't let it keep you here.'

'No, wait. I can't go yet. You don't know who this is.'

'Clearly, somebody who looms large in your thoughts. But, if you need to make peace with her memory, then do it back home when we are safe.'

‘Yes, yes you’re right.’ Steven cast a glance back over his shoulder, and, though he knew that the woman was only a figment of his imagination, he could not help but mouth a sad apology to her. ‘People are still in danger,’ he explained lamely. And, as he stumbled along in Carter’s wake and found himself looking back again, he thought he saw the woman’s lips curling into a slight, approving smile, as she dissolved.

A huge silver circle was suspended, upright, in mid-air. Though it was flat, Dodo sensed a hidden depth to it and knew it had to be a magical portal. The way back home. Its edges crackled and shot off sparks of electricity as rain beat down upon it. That same rain had churned the ground to mud, and Dodo slipped and slid as she fought her way across it.

Joseph urged the first of the evacuees towards the portal. He shied away. Professor Carter took the lead instead. Closing his eyes, he flung himself into the circle and vanished. Emboldened by his example, another man followed suit. When Dodo’s turn came, she deferred to the middle-aged woman from the Gates of Heaven, who sobbed as she left a dream behind. Dodo didn’t want to leave yet. She wasn’t sure why. It was as if she wanted to prolong her adventure, even if it meant being wet and uncomfortable and waiting in line.

Then her eyes caught Joseph’s, and she did know why.

Presently, only Dodo, Joseph and Steven Taylor remained. ‘You go through first,’ said Dodo, talking to Steven but looking at Joseph. ‘I’ll follow in a minute. One minute, I promise,’ she added, upon seeing his reluctance.

‘Make sure it’s no longer,’ he instructed resignedly, before taking a step back and diving headlong through the portal.

And then, there were just the two of them: Dodo and Joseph. Which, Dodo thought, was how this had all started, long, long ago.

She didn’t know what to say, so she turned to the weather for inspiration. ‘You’ve got to do something about this rain. I’m going to catch my death of cold.’

‘Then, perhaps, the sooner you leave here, the better it will be.’

‘Is that what you really think?’

‘You cannot stay.’

'I know. But – but aren't you coming with me?' She tried to make the question sound casual. Instead, it came out like a plea.

'I cannot.'

'Why not? You're human now.'

'I think we both know that is not true. My fundamental nature is unaltered. I am, as always, what others expected me to become. This is my home, Dorothea. I must remain here.'

She found herself blinking back tears. She hoped the rain would disguise them. 'But you'll die, won't you? I mean, you'll revert to – to slime or to one of those ghost-things or something.' Leaving Joseph here, she could accept. The thought that, once she had gone, he might cease to exist, made it impossible.

'I do not relish the prospect of losing all I have gained,' he confessed, 'but there is no alternative. I cannot live on your world, Dorothea. We have already seen the consequences of such an error of judgement.'

'Aren't you afraid?'

'It cannot be such a terrible fate, to return to what I was. I was contented then.'

Dodo didn't care if he saw her tears now. She couldn't have stopped them anyway.

Joseph touched her chin affectionately and smiled at her. 'I will fight it, Dorothea,' he promised. 'I like what I have become. It is something more than the others, I think, and that is thanks to you. I have grown strong. I might be able to retain this self. It will be a lonely life, but my people will lose their memories when they are born again. I hope to guide them; to hold on to my knowledge, so that I may keep them from repeating the mistakes of the past.'

'Good luck,' said Dodo, only to find that she had no voice.

'You must go now,' said Joseph.

'I know.'

She leaned forward, impulsively, and kissed him quickly on the cheek.

He brushed his hand against hers.

As Dodo walked gingerly towards the portal, she could not help but look back, to see him for one final time.

He stood and watched her, smiling kindly, and he seemed composed and happy. The rain had stopped now and the sun was peering out from behind dissipating clouds. A rainbow

had formed and its myriad colours combined to form a beautiful halo effect around Joseph.

He looked like an angel.

By midday, it was all over, bar the inquests.

A podium had been set up on the Sheep Meadow, on the site where once had stood the Rainbow Bridge and the Gateway. It was crowded with the army's top brass, at the forefront of whom stood a proud General Marchant. The polished buttons of dress uniforms sparkled with the lights of a hundred flash bulbs.

'Why aren't I up there?' Alexander Lullington-Smythe protested. 'I should be up there, I made this possible.'

'Sorry, sir,' said the soldier whom, Smythe had come to realise, had been assigned to keep him in check for the duration of the press conference. 'General's orders.'

'We are holding this conference here,' Marchant said into his microphone, 'so your pictures can show that no damage was done to this area. If the rumours of bomb drops were true, then this whole park would have been flattened.'

'Those pompous jackasses up there,' grumbled Smythe, 'taking credit, the microbes! Where were they when there was work to be done, huh? Nowhere. Probably hidden in their bunkers or something, keeping out of danger, not in the thick of it like some of us.'

'If you say so, sir.'

Smythe started forward, but a firm hand on his arm kept him in place. He seethed, but knew that, even if he were to mount the podium, he would be shouted down and ridiculed by Marchant and his cronies. They were driving a metaphorical knife between his shoulder blades, and all he could do was watch.

'All I can tell you at present is that a monumental hoax has been orchestrated by a local PR man. There never were any gods.'

'Me!' Smythe exploded. 'He means me! I'll have his rank for this, I'll sue him! I'll – I'll –' I'll do nothing, he thought bitterly. Oh yes, General Marchant had planned this well. He had even had Smythe compromise his own public image, so that nobody would believe him when the time came. Well, he wouldn't get away with it.

Smythe attempted to shrug off his escort. 'OK, OK, you don't need to follow me everywhere. I'm not interested in

Marchant any more, anyway. I'm going to find a reporter and I'm going to tell him what really happened. And, if he doesn't believe me, I'll find another and another. I'll write the story myself if I have to, but people are going to find out I was a hero!

I'm going to be rich, he thought.

'Members of the press,' Marchant continued, 'I need only ask you to look at today's date. We have all been victims of an April Fools' Day prank.'

Steven, Kathy and the Doctor listened from the back of the crowd. Steven's eyes were on Kathy. As her father spoke, she became ever more tense, clenching and unclenching her fists. 'He's doing it again,' she fumed through gritted teeth. 'After all that's happened: he's still lying, still covering things up.'

'Then perhaps he feels he has good reason,' the Doctor interjected, before Steven could speak.

'For hiding the truth?' spat Kathy.

'He won't be the only one. Humankind can be a very closed-minded species. Your media will trumpet hoax theories. You have started the process yourself, Miss Marchant. You lied to the public, when you believed you had just cause to do so.'

'That wasn't the same thing. It wasn't the same thing at all.'

'I suppose even the people who saw proof won't be telling the same story,' reflected Steven.

'Indeed not. The very nature of the aliens will ensure that. And the nature of your race, of course. Eyewitnesses will be dismissed as cranks, or will keep their stories quiet for fear of ridicule. As the general said, who will believe anybody who saw a bomb dropped here?'

'I saw it myself, and I'm not sure I believe it.'

'Oh dear me, my boy, do you mean to tell me you haven't figured it out yet?'

'I think I have,' said Steven stubbornly. 'Only the gods' most devout followers were left here, right? And they believed the gods would protect them, so they did, even though they couldn't protect themselves any more.'

The Doctor laughed. 'Now that would have been a terrible risk for me to take with human lives, would it not? And how do you explain the lack of damage to the park itself, hmm?'

No, no, dear boy, my plan was far simpler than that. Far simpler.'

Steven frowned. 'Then it wasn't a bomb at all?'

'Correct, correct, you're beginning to get there at last. An unarmed bomb indeed, but everybody in this field – yourself included – believed that it could destroy the gods.'

'So, they believed it too.'

'Even though it could do no possible harm to anybody or anything else. It was enough to drive them out of their humanoid forms and off this world, at least. I doubt that anything could actually destroy them. They are incredible beings, quite incredible.'

Kathy pouted. 'Well, whatever you say, I'll be telling the world all about them in the *New York Ranger*. That's if "Daddy dearest" hasn't got to my editor first, and I wouldn't lay odds against that.' Something about her demeanour told Steven that she might be relieved to have the decision taken for her. She was having second thoughts, although she would never have admitted it.

'You must do whatever you think best,' said the Doctor mildly.

Kathy did not answer. She set her angular features into a determined sulk and marched away. 'No chance of a family reunion there, then,' Steven observed.

'Perhaps, my boy,' the Doctor mused, 'perhaps. Kathy and her father worked to the same ends, at least. I like to think they have begun to appreciate each other's point of view. It might even lead to a reconciliation, in time. Unfortunately, we are not gods. We cannot write a happy ending to every story.'

Steven smiled. 'And, even if we could –'

'It would be a foolish thing to attempt.'

As Carter entered his church, he felt as if he was being welcomed back into a long-lost family. He was safe and contented, wrapped in God's love and sure that all that had happened was by His decree. Nobody else was present, but this suited him well. He needed time alone with his faith.

That faith had sustained him, when things had been at their worst. On the aliens' home world, he had felt that he only survived because of it; because it had given him an indomitable will to live. Now that he had had time to think about it and to consider the nature of the so-called Land of the Gods, this hypothesis seemed all the more likely.

Once, Carter had been unable to think about going back to work for a deceitful government. Now he was planning to return to his office that afternoon. He was no longer afraid of hidden agendas and dark secrets; not now that God had returned to him.

No. Now that he had returned to God.

Marchant's men were packing up radio equipment and bundling it into the elevator lobby. His makeshift HQ was beginning to resemble a publisher's office once more. He marched through the bustle grimly. He had been celebrating his victory with champagne, in the company of the Pentagon's bigwigs. It rankled him that they had left the problem of the gods on his shoulders, only to accept the credit for his efforts now. But the affair had done his prospects no harm. What irked him was being called away from his career socialising, by an internal call which informed him that he had visitors.

Had it been anyone else, he would have refused to see them.

'Doctor,' he said as he strode into the tiny reception area.

The old man got to his feet and nodded to the general, graciously. He was accompanied by the girl, Dorothea Chaplet, and by the man whom Marchant knew only as Steven.

'Why didn't you just come to my office? There are people there I'd like you to meet.'

'I am sure there are,' said the Doctor, 'but I would prefer to slip away quietly, if it is all the same to you. I am only here at all because young Dorothea insisted on saying a proper farewell.'

'You're leaving?'

'That is correct.'

'I mean...' What did he mean? *Are you going back to your home planet now, Doctor?* Marchant could not say the words, even after all he had seen. Not in front of other people. 'You're leaving?' He placed a suggestive emphasis upon the second word.

The Doctor ignored it. 'That is what I just said.'

'You can't.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'I mean, there's so much I want to ask you.'

'That, I think, is my point, dear fellow. Now, I believe we have said our goodbyes.' The Doctor brushed rudely past Marchant and headed for the door.

'Goodbye, General,' said Dorothea, with a winsome smile, as she followed him. 'Thanks for everything.'

'Wait a minute!' called Marchant, halting the trio in their tracks. 'What can I tell my superiors? Where did those creatures come from? How many more of them are there? What's to stop them coming back?'

'What's to stop them?' the Doctor repeated. 'Why, my dear fellow, nothing. Absolutely nothing at all. I have returned your visitors to their home world. I cannot erect a barrier to keep them there.'

'You mean they're free to do whatever they like?'

'Essentially, yes.'

'Oh, but surely Joseph will keep them in line,' piped up Dorothea.

'Perhaps, perhaps,' said the Doctor indulgently, 'if indeed he can retain his memories of this experience, which I'm afraid is unlikely. No, General Marchant, those beings will continue to live as they always did. They will leave their planet and drift through space on a whim, whenever their tiny minds wish it. And perhaps, just perhaps, they will find Earth again one day. We can only pray that humankind is better able to cope with them next time, hmm?'

The general scowled.

'Yes, yes, whenever their tiny minds wish,' the Doctor repeated to himself, chuckling as he ushered Dorothea and Steven through the door. 'Or, perhaps more precisely,' he added, as a thought occurred to him and he turned to face Marchant again, 'whenever *you* wish.'

Epilogue

The temperature had dropped since the gods had left Earth. New York had become a darker place, and, with the early onset of evening, few of Midtown's lights shone into the dark corners of West 25th Street.

A dumper truck nudged its cautious way around parked cars and uncovered the familiar blue cuboid that was the Doctor's TARDIS. Steven looked it up and down, sighing as he recalled the circumstances under which he had last left it. Still, he had not expected to see it again, and the sight brought gladness to his heart.

The Doctor tutted at a spray paint image of a dying angel, which had appeared on the side of his ship. He produced a handkerchief and rubbed at it hopelessly for a second. Then, with a shrug, he seemed to forget about it. He turned to his companions.

'Well,' he announced, 'it is time for me to be going, I think.' He raised an eyebrow. 'Unless either of you two still wishes to accompany me on my travels, hmm?'

Steven grimaced. He was obviously going to make this as difficult as possible.

'Dorothea?'

'Oh, yes please.' Dodo nodded eagerly. 'I want to see Hollywood and Egypt and Paris and Florida again and, oh, just everywhere.'

Smiling indulgently, the Doctor pushed open the police box doors and ushered the excited girl through them. 'What was that about?' Steven stalled, as Dodo disappeared into her new home. 'What does she think the TARDIS is? Some sort of advanced aircraft?'

'Dorothea is a sensible child, but with an unfortunate history. Perhaps she does not allow herself to hope for too much.'

'You'd better warn her then, hadn't you?'

'It would not affect her decision. She will see for herself, soon enough.'

'Huh.'

‘And how about you, my boy?’ the Doctor prompted. ‘Is this goodbye?’

‘You know full well it’s not.’

‘Do I? As I recall, young man, you seemed rather keen for us to part company.’

Steven gritted his teeth, knowing he had to get this over with. ‘I’m sorry, all right? We had a disagreement and we should have discussed it like adults.’

‘Hmm. Yes, well, perhaps I am as much to blame for that as you are, my boy. Perhaps.’

‘But we agree now, don’t we? We pulled together in the end. We did the right thing – even if you did give me a few worrying moments at the end there.’

‘Indeed, yes.’

Steven’s mood darkened. ‘I still don’t agree with you about Anne, though.’

‘I know, my boy,’ sighed the Doctor. ‘I know.’

Dodo leapt back from the six-sided console, guiltily, as the Doctor and Steven entered the travelling machine. Too late.

‘That is something we shall have to talk about, young lady,’ the Doctor scolded. ‘We shall be visiting places where your insistence upon touching anything that is unfamiliar to you could land us all in terrible danger. You must learn to do as you are told.’

‘Yes, Doctor,’ said Dodo dutifully. He sounded like her great-aunt, but then Aunt Margaret had never shown her such wonders. Anyway, the Doctor was a pussycat beneath his bluster. She knew it.

‘Well, young Dorothea, allow me to extend a formal welcome to my home.’

‘It’s Dodo.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Dodo. Dorothea is what my great-aunt calls me.’

‘Dodo?’ the Doctor snapped. ‘Dodo? What kind of a name is that, child?’

‘It’s my name. I thought that was the moral of the story: to be yourself and not what other people expect you to be all the time.’

The Doctor scowled, but did not have an answer to that. Dodo could see that Steven was straining not to grin at her impudence.

'Very well then,' said the Doctor, apparently having to force out each word, 'Dodo it is.'

'Fab!' Dodo exclaimed. The Doctor shot her a glare. 'I mean, that's marvellous, Doctor. Thank you.' One step at a time, she thought.

'You know where your room is?'

'Not exactly,' she confessed with a bashful grin.

'I'll show you,' Steven offered.

'Yes, you do that, my boy.' The Doctor was flexing his fingers over the console, like a maestro about to begin a performance.

Dodo could not contain her curiosity. 'So, where to now?'

Steven laughed. 'Oh, don't expect him to answer that one. The Doctor didn't even want to go to New York. This ship has a mind of its own.'

The Doctor didn't appreciate that slur on his ability. 'Indeed it has,' he snapped, 'and you should do well to remember that and to respect it. Now, my dear...' He turned to Dodo. 'Where would you like to visit?'

Dodo could feel herself turning pink with excitement. For the first time since the tragedy, her future contained possibilities. So many that she could not choose between them. 'Oh, anywhere,' she cried, 'anywhere at all. Anywhere but home. Just anywhere.'

'Then that,' said the Doctor with a smile, 'is where we shall go.'